

BOOKS BY STEFAN HEYM

HOSTAGES

OF SMILING PEACE

THE CRUSADERS

THE EYES OF REASON

The EYES *of* REASON

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A NOVEL BY
STEFAN HEYM



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To Valerie Stone

for her selfless help, and
criticism, and encouragement
with thanks and love

Man's free will differs from every other force in that man is directly conscious of it, but in the eyes of reason it in no way differs from any other force. The forces of gravitation, electricity, or chemical affinity are only distinguished from one another in that they are differently defined by reason. Just so, the force of man's free will is distinguished by reason from the other forces of nature only by the definition reason gives it. Freedom, apart from necessity, that is, apart from the laws of reason that define it, differs in no way from gravitation, or heat, or the force that makes things grow; for reason, it is only a momentary undefinable sensation of life.

LEO TOLSTOY: Second Epilogue to
War and Peace

First Book
G L A S S

CHAPTER ONE

THE FAMILY would be together again.

Everything had gone to pieces in the war — business, country, society, government. But as long as the family was intact, a foundation was left on which to build.

It was a solid and happy thought. It was awesome, too — there was hardly a family in the whole of Czechoslovakia which had not lost someone in the camps or prisons, at Dunkirk or at Dukla Pass, or on the barricades of Prague. Joseph Benda *knew*: He was one of the five hundred men who had formed the Czech contingent of the Royal Air Force; he was one of the eighty-odd who had survived. Lower the flags, muffle the drums, silence!

The dead had no business intruding today. Karel was alive, was coming home — the brother given up for lost, dead, buried in some mass grave. Yet, here was the family standing almost like mourners — Lida, her face set stiffly against her fatigue; his brother Thomas worn and peaked; Kitty forcing herself to remain composed. Petra was the only one with any buoyancy left. She was full of movement, and even at the moments when she stayed in one place, her body teetered on her thin legs.

It was the heat, thought Joseph, three hours of it. The August sun became thick and sticky and rancid inside the hall of the station. People pushed and jostled each other into the dust patterns of the yellow, diagonal rays that fell through the large, dirty windows. People pushed and jostled him and his family.

Perhaps Lida was right; they should have sat down in the waiting room restaurant. But coffee could not be had, nor beer; only lukewarm mineral water, opaque, and with a sickening sulphur smell. And they might miss the call announcing the arrival of the special train.

He would have to do something about it. His wife and his child and his brother and his brother's wife expected him to do something; he was the head of the family, and his uniform singled him out for authority.

Joseph straightened and felt the immediate discomfort of his blouse. It

was getting tight around the armpits. He wished he had bought a new one, back in England; but the war had been coming to an end and he hadn't wanted to spend the money. He should have worn a business suit.

He let his shoulders slump again and said, "Just think of it! All of us together again — after all this time!"

"Do you believe that train will ever get here?" asked Lida. "Couldn't someone go somewhere and find out?"

Joseph, his cheery remark having fizzled, sighed in annoyance. Lida made a move as if to go herself, but he held her back. "I've been to the station-master's — twice; nobody there knows a thing."

"I don't understand it!" Lida dabbed at her high, sweated forehead. "His wire said eight in the morning."

Joseph was examining his wife. He experienced one of those attacks of lucidity frequent with him since his return from the war three months ago. In England, he had not remembered her mouth as so small and thin-lipped, her smile as so dour, her eyes as so wary. I don't know her at all, he thought in sudden despondency; maybe I never knew her.

"Anyhow, it was nice of him to add *Love*," said Lida.

Joseph said, "Thomas and I have waited more than six years to see Karel again. We can wait a few more minutes," and was sorry immediately. He disliked being unkind, especially to his wife, especially today.

Thomas stepped into the argument. "It's not a scheduled train, Lida! And you know what the war did to the railroads here. . . ."

"Yes," Lida said pointedly. "I was here and saw it."

Thomas's mouth, full and sensuous over his rather small but finely shaped chin, closed sharply. Kitty knew this expression. She touched his sleeve and her hand spread reassuringly on his arm. "We didn't *like* leaving the country!" she said.

"But you went!" Lida observed.

Thomas burst out, "It wasn't exactly a pleasure trip! What would you have wanted me to do?"

"Karel stayed," said Lida.

"Karel was not a public figure!" Joseph saw people turn and look at him and his family. He lowered his voice. "I don't want these squabbles! Not today! And not at Wilson Station!"

"You might have added: And not in front of my child," Lida offered dryly.

Joseph looked quickly at Petra. She was listening wide-eyed. He floundered for something harmless and kind to say to her.

"What does he look like?" asked Petra.

"Who?"

"Uncle Karel. What does he look like?"

Joseph relaxed. The implications of the unpleasantness apparently had passed the child by. "Your uncle Karel — well, you see. . . ." He was stuck. Thomas should be able to describe Karel. Thomas could write up a man so that he almost reached out to you from the pages. But Thomas stood pinched-faced, his lips still moving in defense against Lida.

Kitty had slipped her arm through his and was holding her pocketbook in front of the two of them like a shield. "You can't use Karel as an exhibit against Thomas!" she challenged Lida.

"Karel was an idealist," Lida answered. Her smile flashed the silver tooth in her mouth. Bad dentistry, war dentistry. She had wanted to get away from Rodnik weeks ago and come to Prague to have a porcelain cap put on, but there was never any time. She noticed Kitty's eyes fixed on that tooth; it infuriated her. "Very much of an idealist, I should say!"

For an instant, Kitty was bewildered by Lida's new role as the champion of Karel's idealism. Then she said, "He was irresponsible — he was radical — he mixed with the wrong people — he got himself arrested and lost you the Benda Works — isn't that what you used to claim?"

"I don't remember anything of the sort," said Lida. She stared at her sister-in-law — pretty Kitty, with the fat of America still on her cheeks, with her eyes untouched by what other people had had to live through, with her American stockings that brought out the shape of her legs, and with those lips made up like a whore's. "But I do remember that he was an idealist!" she said; then, without apparent relevancy, "He was the only Benda who stayed in the country!"

"I want to know what he'll look like!" Petra was close to tears. "I haven't seen him for so long. I've tried so hard to close my eyes and remember his face. . . ."

Lida turned to her child; her mouth grew soft. That questioning tone still cut into her. Sometimes she thought she preferred the brash aggressiveness Petra had developed. The child veered from one to the other; both were leftovers from the war, from the years when Petra had asked her for food that was not to be had, or had asked her for answers she couldn't give because she, herself, was crazy with fear: the one police official bribed to protect them might be replaced or might grow impatient; they might be picked up like Karel and sent to Pankrac Prison or to Germany, to the camps.

"But you have his picture, Petra. . . ." she said.

"I remember his hands." Petra frowned and was suddenly quite still.

Joseph felt curiously embarrassed. "Doctor's hands," he said.

Lida prodded the child, "Then you remember his face, too."

"But I don't," Petra said, unhappily.

Lida's eye caught Joseph's. "She had Karel's picture with her, no matter where we had to live. I gave her one of you, too, but it got lost."

Joseph forced a smile. "Your uncle Karel was a very handsome man," he said finally.

Lida chimed in, "All the Bendas are good-looking men." She touched the ribbons on Joseph's chest. "You should be very proud of your father, Petra."

Joseph winced. But Lida went on, pointing out the ribbons, explaining the significance of each one. Petra listened politely. Joseph took off his cap and wiped the perspiration off the sweat band.

Why did I wear the damned monkey suit? he thought. Must have been some kind of reflex action, like during the war. When the telegram came, last midnight, I just grabbed the uniform out of the closet. Quite natural.

On the other hand, the telegram hadn't been that much of a shock to him. Twice, there had been some sort of news — too hazy for real hope, too indirect for him to speak to Lida or Thomas about it. A worker had told of a man who had been in Buchenwald more than a year ago. That man was supposed to have known a Dr. Karel Benda from Rodnik who was doing menial work in the camp's hospital. The story could not be traced. Then there was a letter from a business friend in Prague who had written that a friend of his had overheard an American officer speaking of the liberation of Buchenwald, of some prisoner doctors, of a Dr. Benda, if the business friend's friend had heard right.

It had been too vague. And now it was true. The war had ended; May, June, July had passed. Joseph squinted. Why had Karel failed to get in touch with him?

He felt the pinch in his armpits. No, it hadn't been reflex. He was dressed up and gaudy because the uniform made it possible for him to meet the brother whose features, he now realized, he could not recall, either.

The rasping voice that came over the loud-speaker, announcing the departure and arrival of trains, cut through Thomas like a fingernail scratching a blackboard. A wave of garlic hit him, rising from an old porter who sat on a bag and alternately munched a piece of bread and gnawed at a chicken bone. Behind the old man, the age-spotted wall was splotted with large squares where the German markers had been painted out only a few months ago. Outside, the nerve-racking chatter of pneumatic drills was punctuated by the hammering of construction workers. They were clearing up the vicinity, the rubble from air and artillery bombardments and from the heavy fighting in the Prague streets, in May. The whistling

of the engines, the clatter of cars being shunted on the tracks, the steady hum of people's talk around him united in a discordant drone that battered at Thomas's ears.

If there had been silence, he knew he could not have stood it.

He loved Karel, though he had not permitted himself to grieve when Karel's death became a matter of acceptance. It was the first thing Joseph told him of on his return. "I only learned of it when I got back," Joseph had said. Thomas felt that, in a way, he had lost Karel by going to America. Beyond that, he had not wanted to investigate his own feelings; he had kept away from Joseph, who gave himself to his mourning as intensively as he gave himself to any business he undertook. To Thomas, the shock had come last night when Joseph called up and said, "Get dressed, you and Kitty. We're going to Prague to meet Karel. He's alive! Yes, definitely! He's coming home!"

Kitty had had to knot his tie and to button the cuffs of his shirt. He had been unequal to anything. He had been incoherent, laughing and talking in short, incomplete, disconnected sentences. He had poured himself several drinks and was quite high when Joseph drove up and Kitty helped him into the car. He had slept fitfully most of the way from Rodnik to Prague, and now, over the din of the station, there was the persistent, cricket-like ring of his headache.

Thomas tried to channel his thoughts back to Karel. He hoped that his brother's homecoming would be happier than his own. Karel would probably manage all right.

Better than himself. Better than Joseph. He saw how ill-at-ease Joseph was in his uniform. Why should Joseph feel ill-at-ease? Joseph had something to show for the years of war — ribbons, citations, a tangible share in victory and the liberation of the country. As for himself — despite all the official recognition given him on his return, despite all the fine words mouthed about the Great Writer, about the Spokesman of the Czech People, Thomas knew that he could throw on the scales only the torturous hours at his typewriter and the lectures held at ladies' clubs in Omaha or Poughkeepsie. After he was through lecturing his heart out, the ladies would come up to his dais and shake his hand and say, "I enjoyed it so much, Mr. Benda!"

Perhaps, one day, he could talk about that with Karel. He had tried, with Joseph; but Joseph had let him down, Joseph had conveniently forgotten his fine letters from England. How often Joseph had written him about their need for the pattern they had established for themselves before the war and their exile — the evenings spent in discussing the world and the country and its people, Descartes and Comenius and Thomas Masaryk, and the mystic tales which the lonely wood-charrers had in-

vented in the recesses of the Krkonosh Mountains. Only now that he was back, these evenings had failed to materialize.

He and Joseph were estranged. They had lived so long with an ocean between them. No, even the ocean could be bridged. Joseph was too busy rebuilding a business. He was making a religion of it, a crude and stupid religion. There would be a clash one of these days.

Thomas grew rigid. He felt Kitty's concern for him, her nearness, the soft urging. He took in her body whose every curve he knew, on whose every hollow he had rested his head. Yes, if he could talk to her! She was willing to listen, always willing to listen and to help, so willing and so devoted that his skin itched at the thought of it. He knew what she would say and he knew the feel of her — her body always cool to the touch, quite deliciously cool and protecting and slightly aseptic and incapable of releasing him from his tensions.

"Petra," he said suddenly, "if you want to know what your Uncle Karel was like . . . His looks didn't matter. But I'll tell you what mattered: He was the only one of us who stood up to your grandfather Benda!"

Joseph started to object, but Thomas, a fixed smile directed at Petra, continued imperviously, "Karel was not yet your age when he cut up your grandfather's tail coat."

There was a glint in Petra's eyes. "Why?"

"Why?" said Thomas. "So your grandfather couldn't go in style to a funeral — old Matjey's funeral."

"There's nothing so wonderful about cutting up a perfectly good suit!" said Lida. "I wish you wouldn't tell the child —"

"I'm not that much of a child!" said Petra. "Who was old Matjey?"

"Oh, nobody!" Joseph said grudgingly. "A worker who died in the plant, in an accident. Karel was stubborn, all right, but what he did with the coat was just spite. I don't want you ever to be spiteful, Petra!"

"Why did he do it?" said Petra.

Thomas took her hand. "I guess it was because he liked old Matjey. Karel was the type that picks up strays. . . ."

The family chewed on that one. Kitty broke the lull. "There are people lining up at that gate. Don't you think we should see the stationmaster?"

The line might have been waiting to make a suburban train. Nevertheless, both Joseph and Thomas, as if relieved, turned to go, then stopped.

"Well, go ahead!" Lida supported Kitty. The men went obediently; Petra followed after them. Lida pulled out her compact and powdered her nose. "Have you reached the saturation point, too?" she said to her sister-in-law.

Kitty listened to the slight snap as Lida closed the compact. More people were crowding the gate, and they carried an air of excitement.

Though Lida's lips were slightly puckered, her tone had no trace of sarcasm as she said, "You know I don't mind his staying at your house. We have more room for him, but —"

"But . . . ?" Kitty waited. All of them, in addition to Thomas, expected her to have nerves of rope.

"Well," Lida said blandly, "you *were* a nurse — you'll know much better than I how to take care of him —"

Kitty flared up, "I don't like the way we were talking about him!"

"What was wrong with it?" Lida raised her scant brows. "Why in God's name?"

"We talked about him as if he were dead."

Lida's eyes narrowed. Kitty was right, and there was something horrible in the idea. "Well, it *was* a surprise," she said, sounding less determined than usual. "And he should have let us know sooner . . . !"

"He's alive," said Kitty. "He's coming back. Why doesn't this family get accustomed to it!"

"Don't tell me you thought he would ever come back!"

"I never believed he was dead!" Kitty's voice was unsteady, and she hated herself for having said anything.

Thomas and Petra hurried back from the stationmaster's office.

"It's coming!" shrieked Petra. "The train is coming!"

"Due any minute!" Thomas was hoarse with repressed agitation.

Joseph had stopped at one of the ticket windows to buy the little cardboard coupons which would entitle the family to admission to the tracks. On the street side of the station, a number of buses and a few ambulances drew up.

Joseph came into his own. He elbowed the way for his family through the crowd blocking the platform entrances. He shoved his fistful of tickets into the hands of the gate guard, who punched each piece of cardboard methodically. Then Joseph herded the Bendas down the stairs, through the passageway and up again to the platform at which the train was to arrive.

The siding was beginning to fill up. Men and women with Red Cross armbands clustered at one end; people with flags appeared from somewhere; a group of persons who looked like officials walked up and down importantly. Joseph was tempted to speak to one of them, but he gave up the idea — everything about the reception of the train was so obviously improvised, so in keeping with the temporary wooden sheds in which tools and signals were kept, with the worn-out cars standing on the other tracks, with the shabby look of missing panes in the glass roof.

Petra was saying again, "What will he look like?" and Lida was about

to hush her when the long-drawn-out whistle of an engine sounded hollowly out of the tunnel through which the trains pulled into the station. The headlights of the engine blinked out of the dark only to fade as bright daylight hit them. The engine clanked forward, slowly pushing itself along the siding. Two small flags, one entirely red, the other the red, white and blue of Czechoslovakia, fluttered at angles to its funnel. The engineer leaned out of the cab and waved. And then came the cars, behind their windows the faces bunched like pale grapes. The train was still making too much speed for features to be recognized. People were running with it, motioning, shouting.

Petra pulled at Lida's arm. "I've seen him!" she cried. "Which one is he? Where is he?"

Joseph was removing his cap, patting his hair, putting his cap on again. Thomas leaned heavily on Kitty.

With a final screech and clang the train came to a stop. The people with the Red Cross armbands distributed themselves alongside the cars — a thin, impersonal chain of welcome.

At the end of the train, one door was pushed ajar.

The Bendas stood rooted.

The man clambering down was haggard, his hair whitish gray. He wore an American battle jacket; it was unbuttoned and hung from his shoulders in awkward folds. He shuffled forward, searching the faces on the platform. He nodded to the men and women with the red crosses, he nodded to the officials. Whenever he passed the window of a compartment, the faces behind it pressed closer against the glass.

He slowed down.

He saw them: Joseph, Thomas, Lida, Kitty, and Petra — for no doubt it was Petra. How little changed his brothers were! He was conscious of the gray stubbles on his sunken cheeks, of his upper lip falling into the space where once his front teeth had been. He was conscious of his smell, the sweat and dust of long travel, and the smell of the sick which had somehow settled on him. He wanted to call out: Thank God you're all here, thank God I'm here — but his lips were parched and hot, his throat dry, and his voice couldn't squeeze past the sob he was controlling.

He stopped. All at once, exhaustion wore him down. He saw Kitty suddenly tear herself away from the stiff group that was his family. She broke past Lida and pushed Joseph aside and flung herself into his arms.

"Karel!"

He held her tight, but only for a second or two. Then his hands dropped. Over her head, he saw his brothers advance toward him, Petra running

ahead of them; they were loud with, "Welcome home!" and "How are you?" and all the trite things men have invented to cover their emotions at such a time, and Petra was clinging to him, saying, "Uncle Karell! Uncle Karel . . . !" over and again.

The picture was so sharp that he could see himself in it; and yet it was unbelievable, it had the flatness of a photograph. All the years in the camp — first in the quarry, then in the stink of the laboratory, finally in the hospital — he had carried with him the dim, illusory hope of this moment. But as his stomach had been unable to hold the first solid food the Americans had given him, so now his mind could not grasp the warmth and sweetness of reality.

Much more real was the flood of people engulfing the island of himself and his family, the Red Cross workers opening the compartment doors, the sick he had attended straggling onto the platform. Much more real was the eddying of friends and relatives rushing to find their loved ones, of the detraining men spreading out to hunt for familiar faces. And though he sensed the closeness in space of his family, he almost felt as if he stood with those of his patients who, isolated from the laughing, embracing, crying lucky ones, had been met by no one and were waiting without purpose, lost, huddled.

"Dr. Benda! Dr. Benda!"

Perhaps the call had come from one of the officials to whom he was to hand over his charges; perhaps a liberated prisoner, accustomed to his leadership and care throughout the days of travel, was looking for him.

"I must go," he said, and knew he had said it too eagerly. He noticed Joseph's hurt expression. "Where to?" Joseph was asking. "Aren't you coming with us? We've arranged everything. My car's outside. . . ."

Kitty said, "Aren't you free, yet?"

Yes, he was free. He was cut loose, released but for a few formalities — no more barbed wire, barracks, squads, wards, obligations, ties — and yet the limbs of his soul went jerking on as the legs of a wind-up toy will keep moving even after its spring has uncoiled.

He must make them feel that he loved them, that he was glad to be home, and how grateful he was to them for being here and opening their arms to him. But a man cannot change so fast from camp to family. His hadn't been a week-end excursion.

"You must go?" Thomas was leading his finger along his wilted collar. "Why must you?"

They wouldn't understand. They needed time. He needed time. "Didn't you get my letters?" He buttoned his jacket which stood off his gaunt body like a bell from its clapper. "I wrote you three times. We had to have doctors to look after the worst cases, after men who couldn't be

sent home. We took them to a sanatorium in the mountains of Thuringia. That's where I've been since May."

"We got no letters," said Lida.

He nodded slowly, his eyes troubled, his tongue pushing against his caved-in lip. "I'm sorry. I probably worried you. . . ."

"Still the old Karel! Still letting every stray take advantage of you!" With a constrained laugh, Joseph pointed at Karel's charges who were being gathered along the platform. "Haven't you done enough for them?"

"It won't take long. . . ." In his mind, Karel counted the hours remaining to him and to his past before he had to step into family and future. "There's some reception center here. I must take these people there and see about their final checkup—who goes home, if he still has any—who goes to a hospital. . . ."

"Then we'd better plan on staying in Prague overnight." Lida approached the matter practically, and Karel appreciated it. "You'll be dead tired when you're through. Of course, we had counted on having you back in Rodnik tonight. Kitty has a room ready at her house—"

"It's the upstairs room," Kitty said gently. "You remember it. You used to say you could reach out of its window and touch the mountains. It's quiet—and you can be alone there when you like."

"Yes, I think I remember. . . ." He looked full at Kitty. She seemed to grow out of the picture, to become three-dimensional. "Of course I remember!"

"Uncle Karel," said Petra, "I love you."

He turned to the child, the deep lines around his mouth twitching. He put his long, emaciated fingers on her head; the skin of his hand was almost white against the rich, dark brown of her curls.

"I must go now," he said.

Joseph called after him, "We'll be waiting for you at the Esplanade. I'll have a room with bath for you!"

Karel didn't answer. It was to him as if he were still moving outside of time, yesterday over and today not yet begun. Then there were hasty steps next to him, and Thomas's breathless, "I thought I'd come with you. You don't mind?"

"No—" Karel said hesitantly.

"You're sure you don't mind?" Thomas repeated, leaving all other questions unspoken.

"You can help me with the paper work." Karel glanced back at the others and saw them still waiting where they had met him. "I guess I shouldn't have sent the telegram," he said.

CHAPTER TWO

JOSEPH took four rooms at the Hotel Esplanade. It was not as pretentious as the Alcron; it was quieter, more dignified, more in keeping with his idea of family living. The rooms faced the park. Across the square of green he could see the biscuit towers of Wilson Station, and the classic façade of the former German Theater, now hastily renamed Theater of the Fifth of May to honor the date when the Prague citizens took to arms and fought the SS. He could see the iron gray block of the Stock Exchange in which neither stocks nor shares would again be exchanged, either over or under the counter—it was said that the Provisional National Assembly was to move in there.

Joseph had not quibbled over the price of the rooms. Not that he threw money around—but as a businessman he knew that the value of the Protectorate crown, still in circulation, was questionable; the sooner the colorful chits were converted into tangible properties or services rendered, the better he liked it.

All in all, he had done very well in the two months since June, since re-establishing himself in Rodnik. It had been an uphill struggle to get the Benda Works going, but now the furnace was rebuilt, workers had been hired, the gas generator was patched up, coal and glass sand and soda ash and potash and burnt lime and litharge had been scraped together with pleading and bribing and the filling out of numerous forms.

He was ready again to make glass.

He was ready, work was being resumed, contacts with former accounts were being renewed—and yet, he was not even sure that he owned the factory which his grandfather Zdenek Benda had built, which his father Peter Benda had made into an enterprise, and which he had taken over and tried to secure. There were the courts, courts of the first and second instance; and even the courts didn't know whether they had final jurisdiction or whether some ridiculous district national committee, or the new association of glass factories, or a Ministry in Prague, had the deciding word.

Damn it, it was not his fault that the Nazis had marched in and forced Lida to sell at a price too humiliating to mention! And all this while he had been fighting the battle of the Blitz, sending up his good Czech crews over London, being responsible for the technical details of each mission, waiting for the familiar angry sound of the planes returning to

the field, counting anxiously, feeling the dying out of his last flickering hope that a long overdue machine might still limp in, signing the roster with the names crossed off daily. What more did they want of a man before giving back to him what was his?

"What are you staring at?" Lida called from the chaise longue on which she was resting.

Joseph wheeled around. "I was thinking."

He went to the salmon-colored telephone on the night table. He sat down on his bed and took out of his pocket the neat, red leather notebook in which he kept his important addresses. He picked up the receiver and asked for a number.

"Whom are you phoning?" asked Lida. "You've been driving all night. Lie down!"

Half of her body was hidden from his view by the common footboard of the twin beds. The other half shone pink from the light reflected on her satin slip. Her shoulders were bare, and the shadow between her breasts disturbed him.

"I'm calling the Minister," he said, and listened to the faint crackling of the phone as the current tried to get through the war-worn wires.

Lida shifted slightly, supporting her chin on her wrist. "Do you think he's sitting there waiting for your call? You should have phoned him from Rodnik. But your mind was so set on Karel. . . ."

Crackles were still the only sound coming over the phone. Joseph was inclined to put the receiver back on its cradle. After all, he had come to Prague to meet the brother returned from the dead; one didn't mix business with that kind of thing.

"I couldn't very well call Minister Dolezhal at midnight," he said beligerently.

"You won't even get him on the line." She stretched herself languidly. "Nothing works here."

He hung up, came to the chaise longue, sat down next to her, and began to stroke her shoulders.

"I hope Petra doesn't come in," she said. "She's developed a habit of coming in without knocking."

Joseph removed her shoulder strap. "She's with Kitty. Probably fast asleep, poor kid."

The telephone rang. He jumped up; Lida pulled the strap back on her shoulder and covered herself with the blanket.

The hotel operator's voice said, "Have you been trying to call Minister Dolezhal's office? His secretary is on the wire."

With half-closed eyes, Lida listened to Joseph's end of the conversation:

Yes, he was formerly Major Benda of the Czech contingent of the R.A.F. . . . Yes, he and Minister Dolezhal had met quite frequently in London, at Lord Sitterton's, at Kinborough House, at other places. . . . No, he was staying in Prague only this afternoon, but he would like to see the Minister urgently. . . .

Then there was a long pause.

Finally, Joseph spoke again. "Three o'clock will be fine. Thanks awfully. Good-by, sir."

Lida got up and reached for her dress.

"I thought you were tired," he said to her. He was not smiling, but his face had assumed the broad peasant slyness that had come down to him from Peter and Zdenek Benda and the Bendas who preceded them.

"I want to have lunch before we go to the Minister," said Lida from under the flowered print she was slipping over her head.

"You can't just come along!" He laughed uneasily. "This is an official matter, just Dolezhal and myself."

She powdered her flat, straight nose and carefully applied her lipstick. When she was ready, she said, "You're good friends, aren't you—you and the Minister? So why should it be so difficult?"

"Not difficult." He searched for a cigarette, fumbled, lit it. "It's simply not done."

"You forget that I'm the person from whom they stole the Works. You want the Minister's support. I should think you'd want him to get the story firsthand."

There was something to that. But the idea was preposterous.

"Look here," he said, "I'm back, now."

She checked herself in the mirror, adjusted her belt, and came up to him. She gave him a slight kiss on the cleft of his chin, and her fingers reached behind his ear.

"I'm happy that you're back," she said.

He withdrew slightly, not sure of where she was leading.

"And I'm happy that you're working again and are back in business." She took her hat out of the closet. "But keep in mind that the firm of Vesely has been setting you up in it."

He sat down. He managed to give his voice a ring of authority. "Now let's have this out, Lida!"

"Well?"

He was feeling for the right words. It wasn't much money he had needed—half a million crowns to rebuild the furnace, another half million for raw materials and minor repairs and to get started—nothing that couldn't be paid back within three or six months if things went tolerably well; but without Vesely's Cut Glass, which *was* in operation

and *was* producing and which had been in production throughout most of the war, the bank would hardly have given him the loan. And Vesely's Cut Glass was Lida.

"You act as if you deserve credit because your father died and left you the refinery."

This was so patently unfair that Lida didn't even answer.

"I'm sorry," said Joseph. "He was a good man. And you may be sure I'm grateful to him."

"You should be. Without him, your own child wouldn't have lived to greet you!"

"I know," he said, dutifully patient. "I know where the money came from to bribe the police. You've told me more than once."

Lida remarked acidly, "My father didn't inherit anything. He spent the whole of his life making Vesely's into what it is. When he died, last March, he died alone, and I didn't even know it. I owned Vesely's, and I didn't know it. I was starving in that one bare room in Prague, bringing up your child."

He felt painfully how sharp she was, and how blunted he was. Had she ever believed him when he told her that he loved her? And he *had* loved her when he married her; she had been quite beautiful in her way, intelligent, quick-witted, well-groomed, and proud. Of course, there were the unspoken things. Lida was an only child. If one grew up in Rodnik and made glass, it was understood that whoever married her would ultimately control Vesely's Cut Glass. Peter Benda, arranging the match, never discussed this angle with Jaroslav Vesely or, for that matter, with his own son. It might have been better if he had, Joseph thought bitterly. It might have occurred to him that control can be exercised in reverse.

"Well?" said Lida again.

He twisted so as to get rid of the tight feeling under his armpits. "I just don't know. There are certain formalities . . ."

"I think I'm quite presentable," Lida stated, smoothing her dress along her trim hips.

"Listen, Dolezhal and I are not going to reminisce about London. We're going to talk business, we're going to talk glass, we're going to talk Benda!"

"I know about business," she answered; "I know about glass; I know about Benda."

The button, he thought — if I moved the button, the uniform might be a little more comfortable.

Then he said, "I'll call Dolezhal's secretary and tell him about it. Maybe it's all right."

Petra had grown too fast for her age, despite the poor food of the war years. She had the soft, big eyes of her grandmother Anna Benda who, the vicious tongues of Rodnik said, had been driven to a premature grave. Petra was almost as tall as Kitty; and at this moment, sitting on the window sill, her legs dangling to the floor, she was enviously comparing her own body to Kitty's.

She wished her bosoms were large and round, and that her hips had the kind of curves that constantly changed when you walked. She had bosoms, too, but they were just beginning, no more than little pointed swellings; otherwise she was all flat and her hip bones stuck out like scoops. She wished she had Kitty's deep, rich voice, and lips like Kitty's that were so pretty when they were half open. She wished she had somebody who loved her. She wished she were anyone but herself.

Lida stuck her head through the door and announced that she and Joseph were going out, so Kitty and Petra would have to wait at the hotel for Karel and Thomas. Then, as if suddenly remembering, she rushed into the room, nodded to Kitty, and kissed Petra on the forehead. "We'll be back about five!" she said, and rushed out.

Petra showed no reaction. She listened to the short, ineffectual sound of the streetcar bells, and to the yowling of the wheels as the cars came down the hill from the Museum toward Wilson Station. She liked Prague. Her mother hated it and had often said so; but she liked Prague and couldn't stand Rodnik, where she was always alone: most of the time her mother was busy at the office of Vesely's or around the house, and her father came home late, tired from his work.

Her legs stopped dangling. "What do you think Uncle Karel is going to do when he gets back to Rodnik?"

Kitty, who had been turning over the same question, was startled that the child should ask it, and she felt guilty because she should have been concerning herself with Thomas's immediate future.

"I guess he will take a long rest," she said, "and we'll have to feed him up."

Thomas hasn't been eating well since we've come home, she thought. Thomas wasn't working, either, although he had been full of plans and had talked of a new novel while they walked their daily mile around the deck of their ship. It was to be a big novel, something along the line of *War and Peace*. Even if it should become a work of several volumes, Thomas had insisted he would write it. But he hadn't started it — not even a plot outline; and in the month since they had been resettled in their house on St. Nepomuk Hill overlooking Rodnik, where he did have ideal conditions for work, he had never mentioned the project.

"Uncle Karel used to take me on beautiful walks," Petra was saying. "I think he knew every trail in the mountains. And he knew all the stories

that the people told. About the spirits of the trees — that's a fairy tale, of course; trees don't have spirits, do they? — and how there's a tree growing for every man, and little trees for children, and when we die, we go home to our tree. . . . Do you think he'll take me again?"

It was wrong to tell the child of death and of dying, thought Kitty, no matter how you prettified it.

"I suppose he will," she said. "If you ask him."

"But he has changed. And I am different. I'm not a child."

Kitty came to the window and ran her fingers over Petra's bony knee. "People are children until they are seventeen or eighteen; sixteen, at least, you know!"

"I don't think so," Petra said seriously. "Maybe it used to be that way. But when I was eight, I knew about the work Uncle Karel was doing. And I knew that Father was flying in England, bombing the Germans. And I listened to Uncle Thomas's voice, at night, coming from America. And I wanted to kill the German commander at our house, but Uncle Karel said it wouldn't help any. . . ." Her hands were busy, tying knots and untying them in the long cord of the drapes. "Now we have peace, and you say I'm a child."

Kitty knew no answer. Everything had changed here, and the moment you entered the country you had to change. Was Thomas sensing it, too? But Thomas was shutting himself in and telling her nothing of what he was thinking.

Petra suddenly sat up straight. "I will get new dresses," she said. "Mother thinks my skirts should be longer. Of course we'll buy them on the black market. I think it's exciting to buy black. Everything goes on in back rooms, and people are very secretive and they whisper about everything that's important. Will you come with me and help me select things, Kitty? I want to be dressed like you." She appraised Kitty's suit, the flared jacket, the wide collar, the cut of the skirt. "Did you buy that on the black market?"

"No. I bought it at Bloomingdale's in New York."

"Bloomingdale's . . ." said Petra, lengthening each syllable.

"That's a department store. They have them in America. Very big. You can buy everything in them."

"How wonderful! Maybe we'll go to America, too, some time, and I'll buy at Bloomingdale's. Don't they have a black market in America?"

Kitty smiled. "Yes. For butter, for automobiles."

"Just like here," said Petra with satisfaction. "Father got our car black, and it's a pretty good car, too. It used to belong to the *Kreisleiter* in Usti; he couldn't take it along to Germany because he ran out of gasoline. How much was your suit?"

Kitty calculated rapidly. The suit had cost eighty dollars, it was worth

forty-five. Eighty dollars in crowns meant — but that was wrong; you couldn't apply the official rate of exchange, you had to translate the value into the black market course, to be honest.

"About six thousand crowns," she said hesitantly.

Petra fingered the material appreciatively. "Just like I thought," she said finally. "You got it in the black market department of Bloomingdale's."

Kitty frowned. Things and people had changed, and one couldn't explain even as natural a transaction as buying a dress at Bloomingdale's.

Bohumil Dolezhal, Minister in the Cabinet of the reconstituted Czechoslovak Republic, was an impressive man. A large face with ruddy, well-molded planes loomed above sloping shoulders; a bushy, gray mustache successfully hid his mouth. His hands were surprisingly small — white, almost feminine. He liked to use them in short, precise stabs as if he were physically driving home his points. The hands fascinated Lida; Joseph's were like a peasant's compared to them.

The Minister was cordial. But to Lida, the warmth in his twinkling eyes seemed as calculated as his story of how he had won a thousand crowns in poker from the chairman of the parliamentary club of Communist deputies. The bank note, autographed, hung framed on the office wall, next to a picture of Benes. Lida's eyes were roving between the portrait of the modest, worried-looking little President and Dolezhal's hands; she wondered how much of the Minister's cordiality was show, and how much genuine. Joseph had bragged of his friendship with Dolezhal. Whenever they had met in London, so Joseph had pointed out fondly, Dolezhal had shown him off to fellow exiles, to Britishers, to Americans, and even to a few Russians. "What could he possibly gain from me?" Joseph had asked. "I was nobody, to him or to them. . . ."

Lida knew this, and little more. She knew that Dolezhal had fled to London as a fairly minor leader of his party, and had returned a Minister. She had read that he was feared in debate. He never raised his voice, but would deflate an opponent with a few sarcastic remarks which contrasted oddly with his friendly, conciliatory manner.

"I'll help you, to the limit of my power," the Minister was saying, and Lida noticed the qualifying phrase. "But let me have the facts!"

Then he turned to her. She bore his glance and smiled. Dolezhal smiled back.

"It's a long story, sir —" Joseph waited, sitting stiffly. "You don't mind?"

"I've postponed a meeting with my section chiefs. I've got time."

"It goes back to before Munich. . . ." Joseph hesitated again.

Dolezhal said philosophically, "Everything in this country, unfortunately,

goes back to before Munich." His remark struck him as very apt; he made a mental note of it, he would use it as an *à propos* in one of his next speeches. It could be made to sound deprecatory, or accusing, or merely authentic.

His train of thought was interrupted by Joseph's outburst, "I want justice!"

Dolezhal inclined his head.

"For three generations, my family has owned the Benda Works in Rodnik. We're as Czech as the hills on which Prague is built. We employed Czech labor. We made Czech glass. But just about five miles from us, there's the Sudetenland, with another glass town, called Martinice. And there are the Hammer Works . . ."

Once this Benda got going, he talked very well, thought Dolezhal. Make a note of that, too. Dolezhal could see the story develop with the logic of Greek drama — how the old commercial competition between the Germans in the Hammer Works and the Bendas turned political; how, after Munich, Martinice became part of the German Reich; how the Hammer people cut off Benda's raw material and stole his accounts. How just prior to the *Wehrmacht's* occupation of all of Czechoslovakia, Herr Aloysius Hammer appeared in Rodnik and offered to buy out what was left of the Benda Works for a quarter of a million crowns.

Joseph quoted Herr Hammer, imitating exactly the nasal, broad sounds of the Sudeten dialect: "I'll have you know, Benda, that this is a one-time proposition. When we come again, we won't bother about an offer. And I'm perfectly willing to have you stay on as manager, at a nice salary. . . ."

"These Germans!" The Minister stabbed the air. "Always considerate!"

Joseph switched back into Czech. "I threw him out of my office. It was funny to see him pick himself up out of the snow, put on his Tyrolean hat, and shake his fist."

"He wasn't so funny when he came back," said Lida, "and I was left alone to face him."

"Our women were wonderful," the Minister said. His tone made it personal to Lida.

"My husband was gone," she said soberly.

A shade of annoyance showed on Joseph's face. "I fled in March '39, just before the Germans took everything. We were close enough to the Munich border; we saw what they were preparing on the other side."

"Why did you flee?"

"Because I love freedom," Joseph said. It was no pronunciamento; it was a statement of fact. "And because everybody in Rodnik knew where I stood. The Germans knew, too."

A good man, Dolezhal thought, a man of principle. That's what was needed in a country which had not yet found its bearings. The Minister felt a little glow of satisfaction over the instinct which had made him favor this Major Benda, back in London.

Lida said, "My husband had exposed himself, and his brother wrote all those appeals."

"The Liberator Appeals," explained Joseph. "My brother Thomas wrote them; we signed them LIBERATOR; I had them printed, and they went all over the country."

"Of course!" Dolezhal knew of those scathing attacks on Munich and on all those willing to compromise with it. They had created quite a furor, at the time, and the Hacha Government had made half-hearted attempts to find their perpetrators. And this Joseph Benda was the brother of Thomas Benda, the writer. . . . "I've read your bother's novel. Very impressive book. He's back in the country, now?"

Joseph said, "Yes, sir"; but his thoughts went suddenly to Karel, who had come back, too, and a nervous heat rose to his forehead.

Lida was worried that the discussion would stray into the field of literature and stay there. She crossed her legs. "The Bendas never considered their own welfare. My other brother-in-law, Karel, the doctor, was involved in the underground. He got himself arrested and was taken to a concentration camp. That's how the whole thing happened."

The color deepened on Joseph's face; his mouth was set rigidly.

But Lida went on, "The night my husband left, he handed the Benda Works over to me and said: Try to hang on to them. I tried, for almost two years. Perhaps it is a silly story, and we shouldn't bother you with it — so many small things are involved —"

"Not at all; please, go ahead, madame!"

"The German commander of Rodnik lived in our house. That helped me to hold on to the Works. And I know everything about glass, of course."

Joseph wished she would stop — or give her report differently, without bringing in Karel or Petra. She had repeated the story to him at least a dozen times since the day of his return to Prague. He knew she would start with the wounded man who was brought to Karel in the middle of the night. Karel had treated him. Then she would go on with the SS coming for Karel. She would work herself up to a description of Petra mad with fear and hurt.

"Children always know too much," Lida was saying. "Petra went into the room of the German commander, where he sat at his desk, and she clawed at his sleeves and screamed that if he didn't let her Uncle Karel go, her father would come flying over from London and kill every Ger-

man in Rodnik with his bombs, and every German everywhere else. I rushed in, too late."

It was easy, after that, for Herr Aloysius Hammer from Martinice. For all his money and influence, all that old Vesely could do was to keep Lida and Petra out of jail.

Joseph had to admit that Lida had told her tale expertly. She had avoided the melodramatic and kept to understatement. She had known what details to embellish, and when to let the stark facts speak for themselves. If, like Dolezhal, he were hearing it for the first time, he would be moved, too. Only he had sat in on all the rehearsals; now he saw the staging, and it disturbed him.

No, he was really ungrateful. Never in his life could he have brought emotion into Dolezhal's eyes; Lida was fighting for something that was close to her heart and to his.

"And then I came home," Joseph said — "home from the war, to Rodnik. Just the shell of the Works was standing, and the dead furnace. Nothing is deader than a dead furnace. You kick open a work hole. There's slag inside; cracked *chamotte* pans; some hardened, brittle glass, oddly shaped, dust-covered . . ."

Dolezhal looked grim.

Joseph pulled in a deep breath. "So I started all over again. I mortgaged my soul and my wife's property and worked till I thought I'd drop dead."

"And you mean to say," Dolezhal said angrily, "that after all this there still is doubt about restoring your factory to you?"

"Yes," Lida answered simply.

Dolezhal scribbled a line on the desk pad in front of him.

"There are all sorts of authorities," Joseph threw in, "and none of them seem to know just what their authority covers."

"That's a new Government," Dolezhal shrugged. "We'll straighten that out in time."

He took the receiver off one of the three phones standing like fat black soldiers on the left-hand side of his desk.

"Won't you come in for a moment, Jan?" he spoke casually into the phone. "I believe I have a little matter for you."

The man who entered shortly appeared in all things to be the contrary of his chief. It struck Joseph that their heads were not only formed by different methods, but made of different materials. He could visualize Dolezhal's face in marble; the other's would have to be carved in wood. It was a dark, live, deeply lined face, with hollow cheeks, a beak nose, and sparse, straight, black hair that thickened only at his temples.

"Ministerial Councilor Jan Novak," Dolezhal introduced: "my right hand."

Joseph saw that Novak's left sleeve was empty and neatly tucked into the outside pocket of his jacket. He looked away quickly, but Novak did not seem to mind the double meaning in the Minister's remark.

"The Bendas have come to us for help," said Dolezhal. He outlined the case. "Mr. Benda wants only one thing from us, and he put it very nicely and succinctly: *Justice*. Jan, I want you to see that he gets his justice."

The stab in the air that had coincided with each mention of *Justice* had no visible effect on Novak. He said, "Very well, sir, I'll go to work on it." His eyes, strained from too many nights spent reading documents and files, focused on Joseph, took in the shoulder patch, the ribbons, the insignia.

Again, the uniform failed to protect Joseph, and he thought uncomfortably that he should have dressed like a normal human being.

"That's all that is wanted?" asked Novak, his eyes still on Joseph.

There was a slight pause.

Dolezhal had called in his Councilor too soon — Joseph knew it now that Novak was in the room. This would have to be all that was wanted, he decided, at least for today. He would come to Prague another time; he could see Dolezhal again, it would be easier on a second meeting . . .

"The Hammer Works," Lida said into the silence. "There is the matter of the Hammer Works."

The Minister's mustache appeared to sink lower over his mouth.

"The Hammer Works in Martinice. . . . Yes. . . ." Joseph was fumbling. "Herr Hammer has gone to Germany and won't return. The plant has been closed down. It used to employ some three hundred men. That's a big potential — which is being wasted."

"You want it?" asked Novak.

Joseph got up. Lida and her one-track mind!

"I should like to buy it," he said tonelessly. "Don't misunderstand me — it's just an idea I've been playing with. It'll need a lot of financing; but with your approval . . ."

Dolezhal leaned back and laughed shortly. "Some poetic justice in that! First he swallowed you, now you swallow him."

Lida laughed, too.

Novak looked down at his chief's beautifully groomed gray hair and said without any particular emphasis, "I don't think it is for sale."

Joseph stared blankly. He should not have come today, not on the day of Karel's return from camp.

Dolezhal stirred in his chair. "We'll have to investigate the case."

"But what are you going to do with the Hammer Works?" Joseph asked hoarsely. "You don't contemplate keeping a plant like that closed down?"

Novak's empty sleeve had slipped out of his pocket; he reached across his waist to stuff it back. "The local authorities will have to look into that. I suppose the District National Committee in Limberk will concern itself with the question and make suggestions."

The Minister threw a quick glance at Novak — there was some hostility in his eyes; then he controlled himself. Most of the National Committees in the border areas of the Sudeten had a Communist majority.

Joseph, knowing this, too, felt a softness in his calves and sat down again. "You aren't going to nationalize the Hammer Works! They aren't a railroad, or a bank, or a coal mine!"

He could not — no, he *would* not envisage having to compete with a nationalized factory. It would be worse than having Herr Aloysius Hammer on one's neck; Hammer, though backed by the economic and political power of the Reich, at least had been a private individual.

The whole idea was insane! A piece of glass was not like a sheet of steel — from design, through the furnace, until it landed on the shelves of a store, glass needed human hands, human care, human love, whether it was a vase or a pitcher, the elegant arm of a chandelier, a lady's perfume bottle, or a chamber pot. It needed the intimate knowledge, the detailed organizational work of a single owner, a specialist in his field; a seasoned administrator who was in touch with the glassworkers, knew them, could deal with their idiosyncrasies; an expert who could gauge the market and had the sensitivity to anticipate what would sell and what would remain in the shops forever; a connoisseur who could twirl a wineglass between his fingers and tell you at once who had made it and whether the stem was shaped by hand or in a form.

"You can't nationalize a glass factory," he said, "It's nonsense. Whom are you going to put in charge?"

"We'll find people," said Novak.

The Minister's white hand shot out at the Councilor. "You're much too optimistic, as always, Jan." He turned to Joseph and Lida and said warmly, consolingly, "None of these points has been decided, as yet, and the Councilor knows it. We shall investigate the case, as I said."

Novak shrugged. "Mr. Benda brought up a question of policy, which had to be answered on the policy level."

"The Councilor is still young!" Dolezhal's mustache moved, as if he were smiling. Factually, he added: "As a former German property, the Hammer Works probably fall into the category of confiscated enterprises. What disposal will be made of these, we don't know. There'll be a law on the subject."

"A law . . ." said Lida, her face working.

Joseph had not yet absorbed the blow Novak had dealt him. "Where will you find such people?" he continued asking. "This isn't like picking a new man for an office chair. Glass manufacturing! Have you ever looked at a furnace, Mr. Novak? Have you ever held a blowpipe in your hand?"

"No."

"You'll make a mess of it, you and the people you're going to appoint!" Joseph seemed to swell with his outrage; the uniform stretched tautly across his big chest. "Forgive me — but you're sure to destroy one of the great industries of this country, an export industry that we should be building up, that's supposed to bring us dollars and pounds sterling and Swiss francs —"

"My husband is letting his love of country run away with him." Lida stepped behind Joseph's chair and placed her hands on his shoulders.

"I believe we can set his fears at rest," said Novak. "We will select only specialists in their fields as National Administrators for confiscated enterprises."

Lida was thinking rapidly. "Are there any other considerations?"

Novak waited for the Minister. But Dolezhal seemed content to listen.

"Experience," said Novak. "Political reliability —"

The Minister stabbed, "Not in a party sense, of course."

"Of course not," said Novak.

Joseph felt the soft pressure of his wife's hands on his shoulders. He gathered courage. What he was about to do was pretty raw; but then, Novak had been blunt, too. Apparently, this was the postwar fashion.

"If there is a National Administrator to be chosen for the Hammer Works, I'd like you to consider me."

It was out of the bag. He tried to read the faces of Novak and the Minister.

Protocol demanded that the Minister speak first. After a few weighty seconds, Dolezhal said carefully, "Fair enough. We'll keep you in mind."

Novak leaned down to his chief and whispered to him. His sleeve again slipped out of his pocket.

"Right," Dolezhal corrected himself, "quite right. The Councilor reminds me that if we succeed in confirming you as the owner of the Benda Works, we cannot appoint you National Administrator of another glass factory. It would be most awkward and probably counter to the law."

Joseph's skin grew tight over his cheekbones. That's what he had fought the war for! That's why he had given up what was his, been a patriot, left his country, been lonely, lost six years of profits, gone into debt! He hated Novak and he couldn't understand why Dolezhal tolerated the man.

He heard Novak's cool statement, "On the other hand, it is possible that at some time in the future the Government will decide to nationalize *all* glass furnaces. In that case, there would be no objection to your appointment as National Administrator."

"No objection . . . !" Joseph's voice failed him. Herr Hammer, too, had offered him a job.

Dolezhal was moved by a measure of compassion. This Novak who had been wished on him, and the people behind Novak, were feeling their oats and talking big. After a while, they would be maneuvered into the dank little corner from where they had come and where they belonged. But meanwhile, they were doing a lot of harm and hurting decent men like Benda.

He turned on Novak. "The man sits in front of you in his uniform!" The ministerial voice gained timbre, the planes on his face shifted, his moderation was under strain. "He's done something for this country, and this country will do something for him!"

Then his smoothness was unruffled again. "How many workers do you employ, Mr. Benda? . . . About a hundred and eighty? That's a small plant. Under the Koshice Agreement, to which all political parties adhere, only plants from five hundred workers up are scheduled for nationalization. Correct, Jan?" The white hand challenged the Councilor. Without waiting, Dolezhal answered himself, "Correct. And about our rule on National Administrators — all rules are subject to interpretation in individual cases."

"Very well," said Novak, tucking in his sleeve.

The Minister rose. Joseph jumped up. Lida impulsively came toward Dolezhal's desk and said, "We are so grateful. . . ."

"Nothing, nothing!" said the Minister, and then, with *ancien régime* courtesy, "Kiss your hand, madame!"

She smiled. She looked young at this moment, and she knew it.

But Dolezhal had already turned away from her. He permitted his small hand to rest in Joseph's large one and said with just a shade more than a politician's usual heartiness, "You ought to spend some time in Prague! We need people like you — with a good record, a fresh viewpoint, initiative. How would you like politics?"

Was it a suggestion? A request? "Never thought of it, sir!" said Joseph, pleased — or was it merely one of those handouts with which big officials can afford to be lavish?

Novak was saying to Lida, "One last question, madame, if you will. . . . You kept the Benda Works going under the Protectorate, didn't you?"

"Until they were taken from me."

"The German commander was staying at your house?"

"He was billeted there."

The smile and the youth were gone from Lida's face. She had a twinge of the feeling she had experienced on that gray November morning when Aloysius Hammer had come to Rodnik with an officer of the SS, had put a paper in front of her, and had said, "Frau Benda! Kindly sign here — and here — and here!"

However, Joseph, the fool, seemed to be quite happy. Blanketed in satisfaction, he was putting himself out to be pleasant to Novak.

"You know, Councilor," he was smiling, "you'd probably enjoy meeting my brother Karel — he's just come back home. Visit us in Rodnik, please! I'm sure the two of you would hit it off well — the same views, more or less. . . ."

Novak nodded. "I know Karel Benda. We were in the same camp." He touched his empty sleeve. "Your brother saved my life."

CHAPTER THREE

KAREL stretched himself luxuriously. From his bed, through the open window, he could see the wooded, sugarloaf-shaped Mount St. Peter which, together with St. Anna, St. Maria, and St. Nepomuk, formed a quadrangle of hills in whose valley lay Rodnik. Thomas's house stood on the slope of St. Nepomuk, on a piece of ground their father had bought for a summer cottage. But they built solidly in these parts, especially if money was available; the cottage had grown into a sturdy little villa, with upstairs and downstairs, and a balcony in front of his window.

He looked at the wrist watch which Thomas had loaned him; he had returned from camp owning nothing but the sweated clothes on his back, a toothbrush, and an American Army razor. It was late, later than he liked to get up, even on a day that like yesterday and tomorrow would be spent without purpose. He pushed back the soft quilt. He slept naked. For years, he had been sleeping in his clothing, reeking of his own smell and breathing in the stink of others. Now he wanted nothing between his skin and the clean sheets.

He examined his body. He still could be used by an anatomy class studying the structure of the skeleton; but his muscles were beginning to return, and there was a little flesh where only bones and skin had been. Thoughtfully, he tapped the number on his arm that would remain with him for the rest of his days. It was questionable how long that would be.

If he pressed his head into the pillow and let the bedding carry the sound, he could listen to the beating of his own heart. It was regular, after a night's sleep; the least bit of exertion, however, sent it into tumultuous hammering, and something was all wrong with his metabolism. At times, he had horrible pains behind his eyes, he was fatigued when he had no cause for it — ah, the picture was only too clear.

Yet, the recuperative power of the body was amazing. He had seen cases of such utter starvation that even the brain had shrunk in size. Some of those people made a comeback, too, and were normal again. But how long would they last? Somebody should begin a comparative study of the future life graphs of liberated concentration camp prisoners. Not he. After he brought his convoy to the reception center in Prague, witnessed the checkup and signed the transfer papers, he had been through. The book was closed.

The book was closed — easily said with the sun pouring through the window. But at night, his hands, scummy with old gore, jutted out at him from every dream and tore him from his pillow. There were the dim hours when sleep would not return, and the horror with which his own eyes gleamed at him from the mirror. Diagnosis for Karel Benda, Doctor of Medicine: Progressive destruction of the tissue of human dignity. He, who had been a healer, had permitted himself to be turned into a ghoul. Of course, he could quote extenuating circumstances — the selected lives, among them his own, which he had been able to save with stolen medicines and pilfered instruments. He could quote Novak who had pleaded with him to accept the job from the Nazis, and finally had ordered him to take it and hold it — never mind, a man makes his own decisions, and he had had to make his anew every stinking day in the abattoir of Buchenwald.

If only it were possible for him to live out his time without ever making another decision! But knowing his diagnosis, he knew his cure. The first new infant, the first new life he delivered into the world, would start him back on the road to usefulness and sanity.

He grinned without mirth. No child was ever born out of the sterile vacuum in which he yearned to operate. A doctor's hands could not remain clean, nor his mind blank, nor his heart detached. To grow well, he had to decide to live and work with people; to live and work with people, he was not well enough.

From downstairs came the faint rattling of dishes and pots. Kitty was preparing breakfast. Kitty! . . . If the gods had wanted to fashion a symbol of vigorous life, they would have created her. He was grateful for the sounds of her morning work.

His stomach, it seemed, was recovering out of proportion to his mind,

his soul, and the rest of his body. He would eat his way through two soft-boiled eggs, rolls, butter, jam, hot chocolate. He wondered where Kitty got all that, and what she paid for it, and how many crooked deals were involved to set before him such a meal.

He went to the bathroom, shaved slowly, and brushed what Pankrac Prison treatment and Buchenwald diet had left of his teeth. Some time, only not now, not in the next weeks, he would have to go to Prague to have dentures made. He climbed into the tub, turned on the shower, nice and lukewarm, soaped himself — how did Kitty procure such fine soap? — then let the water run full force, first hot, enjoying the prickling of the many firm, small streams, then cold. Breathing hard, he rubbed himself dry with a large, soft towel. He stuck his legs into Thomas's pajamas, slipped into Thomas's robe which was a little too short for him, put on Thomas's slippers, lit one of Thomas's Chesterfields, and leisurely walked down the carpeted stairs.

Kitty was fresh and pink and healthy and bustling. He liked the way in which she said, "Good morning!" and, "How did you sleep?" He felt her sleeve brush his cheek as she poured him his chocolate. All this gave him a feeling of well-being. There was nothing personal about it. The camp had deadened him to this kind of stimulus, which sometimes worried him.

She sat down opposite him and watched him eat.

"Where is Thomas?" he asked, nodding his head toward the unused place-setting at the end of the table.

"Still sleeping in his study," said Kitty. "He must have been up all night."

"Is he writing something?"

"I heard him type." She hesitated. "I hear him every night; in the mornings, his wastebasket is full."

"That's not so good?" asked Karl, carefully replacing the empty eggshell upside down in its cup. It created the illusion of a clean job of eating well done.

"No," said Kitty, "it is not good."

The worry lines on her face hadn't been there before she went to America. He recalled Kitty as something of a country girl — even when he had seen her in her starched nurse's uniform — a clear forehead, her eyes guileless. That was gone.

"Well, what is he working on?"

"He doesn't tell me."

"But when you go in there, don't you see? He doesn't hide his papers!"

"I don't go in. He's told me not to."

Karel's nail beat a tiny tattoo on the empty eggshell. "What's the matter with him?"

"I don't know. Things would be easier if I knew."

He ran his hand through his ruffled, wet, gray hair, trying to straighten it. Then, in a gesture familiar to Kitty, he put both his elbows on the table and lowered his head into his spread hands. From underneath the screen of his fingers, he asked, "Tell me, Kitty, what did he really do in America?"

"Thomas worked hard. They say America is easy, but it's a hard country in which to earn a living. For a writer, at least."

She was not telling everything. Perhaps she didn't want to. Karel said, "But he didn't write another book?"

"No."

"I know none was published," said Karel. "But I thought maybe he came back with one."

"No."

Her hands were smoothing the tablecloth, over and again. "He had no time."

"In six years?" asked Karel.

Kitty's words came glibly. She was saying things which she must have laid out in her mind, often. "Everything is different, over there. He had to write what they could use. Articles, short stories, sensational stuff. And then the radio speeches, and his own lectures. He traveled all over the country."

"That must have been interesting!"

"In America, the hotels are the same in New Orleans and Oklahoma City, in Minneapolis and in Philadelphia."

"The people, too?"

"The people whom Thomas addressed — yes, I think so."

"I met Americans," said Karel, "at Buchenwald. I found them very interesting, very different."

"Those must have been other Americans."

Karel smiled. "And you say they couldn't use what Thomas Benda wanted to write?"

"I don't know whether he really wanted to write anything. At least after the first few months, he no longer wanted to. Wait till we're home, he always said. Wait till we're back home."

"It was the war," said Karel. "I'm sure all that Thomas did, and said, helped us greatly."

"They called him 'the Voice of Czechoslovakia,' or 'the Spokesman,'" said Kitty.

Karel lit a cigarette and felt the tang of the tobacco on his tongue.

"Elinor Simpson coined those names for him," Kitty continued. "And she saw to it that they were inserted in his publicity, and finally the names stuck."

"Elinor Simpson?"

"The American writer."

"Oh, yes — " Karel frowned. "Joseph used to talk of her."

"She publishes a column every day." Again Kitty spoke as if she were reeling something off. "Some sort of editorial article which is printed in many papers over there. She has lots of influence; people listen to her. She did a great deal for us. We would have starved without her."

"And she admired Thomas?"

The question seemed naïve; Elinor admired no one but herself. But this was too complicated to explain to Karel in a few sentences. So Kitty only said, "Yes."

Karel tried to imagine the Simpson woman, her motives, and the relationship that must have developed between her and Thomas and Kitty. "You didn't like her?" he asked.

Kitty began to clear away the dishes. He let his eyes follow her hands and the brush and brass pan as she cleaned the tablecloth of crumbs. Idly, he debated with himself whether he should press her for an answer; in the end, his lack of ambition won out.

"What will you do today?" her voice filled the pleasant void of his brain.

He sighed. "I'll sit around. Maybe I'll read a book. Has Thomas received anything new I could borrow?"

"No."

She had finished her work. The table was bare and white but for the solitary setting that waited for Thomas.

"What would you like to do?" she said.

He believed he heard a trace of reproach. "Yesterday I went to Joseph's and he let me have his collection of Thomas's writings from exile." He talked quickly, as if an accumulation of words could make her feel that his day had been crowded. "Joseph collected every scrap. A fat volume in buckram. I read a few of the English pieces in it, some of the other things that were in Czech, and two or three of the radio speeches."

She swallowed her question, but he knew what it was.

"It's so rarely," he said, "that I'm conscious of how beautiful an instrument our language is. Thomas employs it as a master surgeon uses the scalpel. You won't believe it — but there were men at the University so skillful that you enjoyed seeing them dissect a carcass."

There was a lull.

"But you couldn't finish reading?"

"I've got to read slowly, these days."

Yet he had demanded another book, thought Kitty. He hadn't been able to go on reading Thomas's work. Thomas had sweated over it, had written with such pain, such self-discipline. . . . She was hurt, all the more so because she, too, could show nothing for her years in America but that buckram volume of dated material.

"You ought to be thinking of work, yourself," she said with sudden harshness.

He looked up. Their eyes met, and lowered quickly.

"I have been thinking of it," he said. "I can't stay with you forever."

"That's unfair!" she cried, and then lowered her tone. "You know I didn't mean it that way. You know it makes me unhappy to see you —"

"Fall to pieces?"

Her hands came up in protest. The sleeves of her gown fell back and revealed her arms to the elbows. He stared at the smooth texture of her skin, and from there his mind wandered to his good breakfast and the cool white sheets.

"I've been thinking of writing to Prague. I'll apply for a position at the University Hospital. Perhaps I'm still good enough to start on some research."

"No!" she said tensely. "I want you to stay here. It's better for you —"

"What's going on here?" Thomas stood in the doorway. "What's this nonsense about your leaving us?"

His shirt was crumpled, his pants spotted with old ashes. He seemed to have slept in his clothes, and slept only little. A strand of hair hung over his forehead, and his eyes were sunken above their dark rings.

Neither Kitty nor Karel knew how long he had been standing there, listening. Kitty pulled down her sleeves. Karel lit another cigarette; he had to use two matches.

"Let me have some coffee," Thomas ordered. "Is it strong enough?" He turned to Karel. "We brought coffee with us from the States, lots of it; but Kitty tries to save it. Weak coffee is as bad as no coffee, just a waste. And we can always buy more. For money you can get everything, even here."

Kitty silently placed the coffee before him. Thomas savored it and put down the cup. "It's all right," he said. "My mouth tastes like an old shoe. Why have you two been fighting? Why don't you control yourself, Kitty? . . . America does something to people. You can't understand it, Karel, unless you've been there. I think Kitty was the most even-tempered creature when we married and lived in Rodnik. But ever since the States she has her moods—haven't you, darling? . . . You must forgive her, Karel, it hasn't been easy for her, putting up with me."

He rubbed the corner of his eye.

"Toast, please!"

Kitty handed him a slice. He buttered it, put jam on top, bit into it, and laid it aside.

"I've come to a conclusion!"

He said it with determination, almost optimistically. Kitty perked up. Had he started to write despite the wastebasket full of discarded pages?

"If I tackle this big project — if I start in the days of President Masaryk's death and lead it to the liberation — show the whole panorama of the war and this country — I've got to have a focus, a central theme!"

Kitty sat very still, as if any movement on her part might jar the sensitive mechanism that was Thomas's mind.

"Humanism has died in this period," Thomas went on. "The old values have crumbled. But what has taken their place?"

Karel waited. It was clear that Thomas was eager to supply his own answer.

"You know what gave me the idea? That day when you arrived in Prague, Karel, when I went with you to the reception center and stood with you and watched with you the parade of broken people, broken and yet victorious because they had survived. Why did they survive? Why did you survive? Where did this strength come from? That's the problem, and that's the novel. Don't you see it? How do you like it?"

Karel stiffened, only his tongue kept pushing against his lip. Buchenwald — performing post-mortems and writing out medical reports on eighty priests, each of whom had been inoculated with 10 cc. of virulent pus; carving up emaciated bodies and finding and registering the atrophies of the liver, the hemorrhages of stomach, pancreas, and brain, which were the result of intravenous injections of Neosalvarsan as a supposed cure for malaria; slicing into hundreds of cadavers of young men who had been forced by the SS *Luftwaffe* into compressed air chambers from which the air was suddenly withdrawn — from where had come his strength? And why had he survived — after seven different examinations in seven different Gestapo jails and camps?

There were dozens of answers. Luck; physical constitution; the final achievement of a degree of insensibility which made vegetating preferable to a death he could have administered to himself any day; the fact that Jan Novak had been in the same barracks with him and had talked to him of the reasons for living and the necessity for living; discipline, as enforced by Novak; ruthlessness in letting the weak weaken and the dying die; complete strangulation of outside-world ethics, medical and otherwise. . . .

How could he explain to Thomas what he wanted to bury; how could

Thomas understand, and know, and know so much and so deeply as to write about it and to write the truth?

"What do you think of it?" Thomas repeated.

"It'll be a difficult book."

"All books are difficult. But you'll help me. It'll be your story, the story of a man like you, his reactions, decisions, changes. Through him, we'll see all the others, life, death. . . . It'll be a great book, because it's the greatest story of our time!"

Karel saw how much Kitty wanted to add a plea to Thomas's demand. He wished he could help the two of them. But he was no hero for the books. If Thomas acted as if he had found a hero in him, there were other reasons.

"You don't believe I can write that kind of book?" Thomas glared. "Because I haven't been in camp, myself, because I spent these years in America, away from it all, because I haven't been beaten physically, and starved, and haven't seen it with my own two eyes — is that why you doubt it? Is that why you want to exclude me?"

Exclude me . . . thought Karel. What had happened to Thomas? — He'd been uprooted, but who hadn't? And in a way, this had always been Thomas's problem; child or man, he had never been secure; emotionally, he had always depended on others, women mostly — their mother, Kitty, and in America, apparently, this Elinor Simpson. Intellectually, he'd always taken an offside view of the world or seen it through the filters of someone else's eyes — Joseph's, perhaps, who had taken his youngest brother in hand.

"I'm willing to tell you everything," Karel placated. "I'll answer all your questions. I'll even tell you the things I'd rather forget. But after that, you still won't have the book."

Thomas stood up. "Why don't you leave something to my insight into people and my imagination as a writer? I am a little more than a recording machine, you know! . . ."

He began to walk up and down.

"Joseph thinks I swallow his wisdoms whole. He still believes that his ideas were at the bottom of my novel and the *Liberator Appeals* and what have you."

They very possibly were, thought Karel.

Thomas stopped pacing. "Well, they're not! They're not, and — Kitty! Why are you making faces at Karel? You don't believe me, do you?"

"But I do!" she said. "You are —"

"I know what I am!" he cut her off. "And I know what I'm able to do!"

Karel crushed his cigarette. He felt sorry for Kitty. Whatever was wrong with Thomas, it was evident that he no longer could use Joseph as a crutch,

or wanted to free himself, or had to free himself, and was grasping at anything that came his way.

But it would be a tragic mistake for Thomas to depend on him, Karel thought. In the end, there would be that gulf, unbridgeable, full of experiences which could not be perceived by anyone who had not been through them. There would always come a point when he would have to say to Thomas: *This I cannot explain.*

"I'll tell you everything," he said again. "But I'm afraid I'm too close to it —"

"Don't worry, *I* have the distance!" Thomas retorted. "If I had lived through what you went through, I wouldn't attempt to write it — on the other hand, I wouldn't have lived through it. As it is, the conditions are ideal!"

Karel was tempted to give in. Maybe Thomas *could* do it! Then he reconsidered. In the last analysis, not a book but a human being was at stake. A human being, his own brother, weak, hard-pressed, troubled, following an old pattern in seeking support — only this time seeking it from someone who couldn't give it. What Karel feared was the hour of disappointment when Thomas would have to turn away from him and would be faced with nothing.

"Don't pick me for a character in your book," Karel said. "You don't know me, and it's just as well. Your novel needs a hero, and I'm a wreck. Write about people and things you know."

"What things? What people?"

"Whom do you think you know best?"

"Joseph," shrugged Thomas.

"Well!" Karel said encouragingly.

"Joseph!" Thomas sneered. "What do you want me to do — write a satire?"

Karel didn't reply.

"I'll give you my estimate of Joseph," Thomas said. "He's nothing but a money grabber. He's a self-centered, self-imagined giant with feet not even of clay but of pigeon dirt. Clear enough?"

Kitty turned to Karel, her eyes dark with anger. "You're sidetracking him. Couldn't you help him — after all, he's asking for little enough —"

Thomas waved her off. "Ah, you're the same — you, and Karel, and Joseph! The whole damned family disgusts me!"

He walked out of the room. Slowly, the door swung to rest on its hinges.

For a while, Kitty and Karel sat in silence. The anger died in her eyes and something else took its place — a kind of hopelessness which tugged at him just because it seemed so out of character with the Kitty he had known.

"Why did you refuse?" she said, finally. "He was so sure of himself, for the first time since I don't know when. You might have tried to get over whatever was stopping you. . . ."

"I guess I should have. I'm not much good. I'm very tired." He fingered a cigarette.

"I'll get a book for you to read," she said, getting up.

"Thanks," he said heavily, "don't bother. I've decided to go out."

He was a fool to meddle in this matter. He should stick to his soft-boiled eggs and his white bed and the sunshine, but something had to be done about Thomas, and very likely about Joseph, too. And he might as well add himself to the list.

Around noon, Karel walked down the serpentine road from St. Nepomuk, resting frequently, watching the green-roofed belfry of the baroque church on Rodnik's market square until it became hidden behind the buildings of the town. Continuing through the crooked streets, between the age-mottled houses of the glassworkers, the soles of his feet enjoying the long-missed feeling of the cobblestones, he passed the old bridge spanning the Suska River, turned another corner, and was faced with the newly gilded sign, BENDA GLASSWORKS.

"My compliments, Doctor!" said the gatekeeper, a fixture of his youth. "Coming to visit us again?"

"Been a long time," said Karel, "hasn't it? How's your wife?"

The gatekeeper snickered. "Still creaking! The years haven't been kind to her. They never are to women. You'll find Mr. Joseph in the office, I think."

"Thank you!"

Karel walked a few steps into the yard, then stopped. He had to stop. His heart was racing, and a sudden pain behind his eyes nearly blinded him. There was no reason for his heart's behavior except the onrush of his lost childhood, the many times he had come through this gate, sometimes with Joseph, more often alone. Their father had favored these visits, setting aside regular hours for conducted tours, leading the way through the plant, a son at each side, showing them every detail of production, explaining every step, and afterwards testing them on what they had seen and learned. Peter Benda wanted his sons to take an interest in the business early; but while Joseph had tried to get out of the duty as often as he could, Karel had always attended, sometimes coming uninvited, standing at the foot of the furnace platform, watching the workers blow the fiery bubbles and shape them, observing the strained faces, hollow cheeks filling, foreheads reddening, eyes bulging.

He had come not because he liked it, but because he was afraid of it and

hated it. He had been afraid of the fire and the heat and the dance of the men and the hissing of the steam. He had feared the men, too; suspecting that he was being groomed to be their boss, they were always wooing his favor, stopping their work to teach him the use of the blowpipe still wet with their spittle, and offering him beer from the large pitcher which was the common property of every work team.

He had been drawn there and hated it and had not dared to show his hate to his father until the day Peter Benda brought him to the Works to watch the repair of the glowing hot furnace. They had to pull old Matjey out from under the grating, burned brittle. Dr. Moser, who had come to look at the shriveled, stinking, burlap-covered body and to pronounce it dead, gave the screaming boy a sedative. But he had gone back to the Works, even after that — despising his father because Peter Benda, upright and strict and strong-voiced, had given no sign of guilt or atonement. And so he had cut up the tail coat.

Karel's heart quieted down, the gray spots disappeared from his vision. He walked on, into the smaller house to the right of the furnace building, to Joseph's office.

Joseph was not in. Karel glanced at their father's portrait which hung on the wall facing Joseph's desk. The old man looked out of it with hard eyes, his square face restrained and severe, his chin set against his wife, his sons, the world. Why on earth did Joseph keep the picture there? Joseph must have disliked their father as much as he had.

Underneath the portrait stood a cupboard with the collection of originals Joseph had designed. There were vases and goblets and ash trays and cocktail sets, all in good taste, all with a rugged quality, an individuality, and some of them really first-rate. It was difficult to see Joseph as a creative man, an artist — yet he was, after a fashion. Joseph rarely talked about this part of his work; perhaps he did not consider it work, but a diversion; he practiced it only in his free hours. There was, thought Karel, a subconscious connection between the portrait and the cupboard placed below it. That's how the old man had roped Joseph into the business — via the detour of its creative end.

A shed connected the office with the furnace hall. Karel remembered the layout as if he had not been away from it the greater part of his adult life — in Prague, and in the camps. Carefully, he picked his way between the discarded forms of singed beechwood, the large-handled wooden troughs filled with the colored shards of the cullet, the piles of many-shaped, dust-covered glass articles waiting to be shipped to the refineries or to be smashed and ground into cullet and to be remelted and used, once more, as raw material.

He passed through the shaky door and stood in the furnace hall. He

caught his breath. There was the same unearthly light that had permeated the experience of his childhood — this mixture of strident yellow pouring out of the work holes of the furnace, and of gray filtering through the narrow unwashed windows high up. On the platform around the furnace was the same witches' dance as some fifty scantily clad, perspiring men raised and lowered, balanced and swung, turned and twisted their long iron blowpipes; the same gleaming pipe ends, flashing white and yellow and orange and red and purple; the same slowly cooling, always changing bubbles of glass. There was the same smell, a mixture of fire and water and dust and glass and iron and sweat and burned wood and beer, a conglomeration of evaporations. And in the hot air above the furnace, around the electric wires and the large cross made of *chamotte* bricks, incredibly fine strands of glass still wafted in eerie cobwebs — glass that had escaped from the furnace in gaseous form and had hardened. In the center, crowned by the squat, whitish gray dome and its pious cross, stood the furnace as he remembered it, filled with flame and pans of white-hot, thinly fluid glass. There was the same absence of human sound, only the steady roar of the fire broken by the occasional sharp crack of a pipe struck against metal to knock off a glass completed, or the tinkle with which the glass fell into a shard-filled container.

Karel's appearance did not interrupt the work. Many of the men were new or had been hired from other plants not yet in operation; since these men went on working, those who recognized him and might have liked to step down from the platform to greet him could not afford to leave their teams. Some nodded to him; one pointed to the clock on the wall; it would be two o'clock soon, quitting time, he seemed to say, and Karel understood him. They were working on piece rate; any minute taken from the job meant the loss of a few precious crowns.

Karel heard Joseph's voice coming from the direction of the open annealing kilns which lined the wall of the building. He moved toward it. Joseph, in his shirt sleeves, emerged from behind the last of the ovens. He seemed to belong, to be in his element; he and his work and the work of all these men appeared eminently sensible when Karel compared them to his own existence at Thomas's house, his aimless walks, his hours and days stretching pointlessly.

Joseph put his arm around his brother's shoulders. "Nice of you to come and have a look! You should have seen the place when I came back from England — what an unspeakable mess! I put in a couple of months of headaches; but now we're really rolling along. Makes you feel good, doesn't it?" "It does!" Karel meant it, and he felt that the subject of Thomas was quite unreal in these surroundings. "How are the men?"

Joseph looked at the continuous silent movement around the furnace. To

him it was no witches' dance — every motion had a purpose; every lift of hand, every breath helped to fashion one more piece of hollow glass; every step up there on the platform meant money coming in after all the glass that had been smashed in the war.

"The men? . . . They're all right. Not as good as before the war. They need better food, they need a lot of things. . . ." He shrugged. "But so do we all."

He bent down to pick a goblet out of the trash tub. Holding it against the light, he shook his head and called to the team master at the nearest work hole, "Czerny! Why don't you watch your men when they put on the stems! We can't afford this waste!"

The team master said nothing.

Joseph tossed back the goblet. It broke. "We should have no more than 8 per cent rejects, 10 at most. We have 15. I know the men's problems, I understand the men better than they think. But they believe that now they can do what they please." He snorted, "Their Works Council doesn't help them to make better glass. And if they don't make better glass, they can't earn more money. It's as simple as that."

He called to the foreman for his jacket. He put it on, brushed some dust off the sleeve, and said, "Let's go to my office. I've got some Slivovice, the real stuff, slightly yellowish — you know?"

Karel followed him.

Joseph became reticent the moment Thomas was mentioned; he admitted to some sort of discord between them. Over what?

"God knows! He's always been peculiar, and America hasn't improved him. I have a sneaking suspicion he feels too big for his breeches, Our Great Writer and all that. . . . Oh, I know how to handle him; but it takes time, and time I haven't got." Joseph gestured vaguely at the pile of papers on his desk and at the furnace hall beyond.

"He used to think the world of you!" Karel said carefully.

"He still does!" Joseph sighed. "He still does. I have the letters he wrote me to England. . . . It's a terrible responsibility — don't you see, Karel? I've taken it on and I'm carrying it; I'm accustomed to bearing responsibilities!" This last was said pointedly, as if he had never forgiven Karel for going off to Prague to study medicine instead of joining him in the business.

"And Elinor Simpson — what's she to him?"

Joseph's heavy lids opened a degree wider, but he didn't ask the question that rose in his mind. "A most remarkable woman," he stated instead. "You've never met her, have you? Too bad." He looked up at his father's portrait. "You probably know how I felt before disappearing to England. The Works, and Thomas — that's what worried me. The Works I had to

entrust to Lida; Thomas, to Elinor Simpson. I'm sure she did well by him."

"I'm not so sure," said Karel. "In any event, I'm afraid Thomas has come back needing more than a caretaker. He needs someone he can believe in."

"That's nonsense! . . . What do you want me to do? Who am I supposed to be — the Archangel Michael?"

"Since Father's death and your coming into your own, you've been building yourself up to it — in Thomas's eyes."

"I've believed in certain principles, and I've said so. I've tried to live a decent life, and I think I've done so. That's all."

"Well, that's all that's wanted of you!"

The telephone rang. Joseph reached for it, then dropped his hand and let the phone ring.

"I haven't changed," he said truculently. "Not that I know of."

"Then why doesn't Thomas trust you?"

The ring was insistent. Joseph pulled up the receiver. "Yes," he said, "yes — yes." His voice sounded tired. "I'll be right over." He hung up and turned back to Karel. "That was Lida. I have to go to Vesely's."

There was a pause.

Then Joseph pulled himself up and said, "Look here, Karel, I assure you it isn't a question of trust or lack of trust or disappointment over anything. If you want to help Thomas, you've got to spend a lot of time with him, argue a lot of silly problems that he pulls out of a hat, and have patience, patience, patience. I'm running two businesses now — mine, and Vesely's Cut Glass. Even if Lida thinks she's sitting in the big chair over there, I'm the one who has to run the show. So where am I going to get the time for Thomas? Why don't you try and sit down with him?"

Karel's long hands clasped and unclasped. "I can't. Maybe later I will — not now."

"On second thought — " Joseph's face broadened in the sly grin of the peasant, "on second thought, I don't know that I want you to. You'd fill him full of your radical ideas, and that would be the worst thing for him. . . ." He stretched. "Don't worry, I'll think of something! And now, you must excuse me — I've got to run. There's the Slivovice! Make yourself at home!"

He grabbed his hat.

Karel poured himself a glass, sniffed at it appreciatively, and put it down again. If he hurried, he might still catch some of the men in the plant to whom he should say hello. He had kept away from these men, from everybody in Rodnik. He didn't want to stir up the past; it would be awkward to try to warm up in what were to become normal times the relationships

formed when the enemy was in the country. Besides, it would be embarrassing for Joseph.

He had learned much from these men during the underground. It had been difficult at first — a Benda was a Benda, in Rodnik. But he had been the doctor; he had come into their homes and delivered their babies when the midwife couldn't deal with it; he had listened to the rattling in their chests when they developed emphysema of the lungs; he had filled out death certificates and signed insurance claims. He had gained their confidence finally, but only after he had swallowed the lesson that, in many ways, they knew more than he did, and were clearer in their heads and had fewer hesitations and were more ready to sacrifice than he. Then he had begun to learn: From Otakar Blaha, the grinder, from Frantisek Kravat, the melter, and men like them — and from Professor Stanek, who was an intellectual like himself. He had learned about people and he had learned to study — he had never read as much as in the nights when he could hear the boots of the German patrols on the cobblestones of Rodnik. And he had been quite happy, then, come to think of it, although he was risking his neck, and although his doctor's car was being used to transport men he did not know and material he did know to be highly incriminating.

Some of these men were dead. The others he had avoided. But having shown his face in the plant, he could avoid them no longer.

He found the furnace hall empty. A restful, warm stillness had settled down in which nothing moved except the thin, ghostlike strands above the furnace. The witches' dance was over; only the fire glowed white through the cracks where the doors to the work holes did not close properly.

"How are you, Doctor?"

Karel whirled around.

"I'm up here!" The voice came from the other side of the furnace. "Come up here, why don't you? I've got to watch this."

A face rose beyond the furnace, the high forehead glistening with sweat and reflecting the sharp light of the fire from the open work hole before which the man was working.

"Kravat!" said Karel.

The face disappeared; the voice mumbled something.

Karel came around the furnace. Frantisek Kravat was stirring the melting glass in the pan inside the furnace: the hair on his chest trembled in the heat; his face was now hidden behind the protective shield which his teeth, clamped hard on its mouthpiece, were holding in place.

Karel blinked shortly into the flame, then closed his eyes. The square of fire still wavered in front of his lids.

The melter dropped the shield on his chest. "You've come back?"

"Yes."

"I've thought about getting up to St. Nepomuk and dropping in on you." Kravat picked up his shield and turned back to the furnace.

Karel watched the play of muscles in Kravat's lower arms as the melter handled the iron bar and stirred the golden mass.

"Why didn't you?"

Kravat grunted.

"I kind of expected one of you would come and visit."

Kravat shook his head.

"Why not?"

Kravat had finished stirring. He took a shovelful of the coloring powder out of a box at his feet and threw it into the furnace. "Times have changed," he said. "But you might have paid old Professor Stanek a call — he's back, you know?"

"So I've heard." Karel sucked in his lip. The melter stood upright, leaning on his bar, tall and angular and bathed in the stream of light from the furnace. "I was in camp, a long time," Karel said finally.

The melter nodded slowly. "We know. We know what you did and how they questioned you and how you said nothing. We have a book for you. It was hard to get — we had to order it in Prague. It hasn't come yet. Engels's *Origin of the Family*."

"I'm a Benda," said Karel wryly. "I'm an expert on the family."

"This book treats it from a different aspect." Kravat took up his shield, and resumed work at the furnace. His shirt began to show dark patches of sweat. After a while, he stopped. "You can't leave the glass alone for a minute. . . . A book is nothing. It's what we feel — that you're back with us, and that you're alive. . . . I'm not a speechmaker, never was —"

Karel began to laugh. "Franta!" he cried — "You fool, you God-damned, silly fool!" But he meant himself, too, sitting in the villa on St. Nepomuk, waiting for Christ knows what.

Kravat's face showed nothing of what he was thinking, but in his voice was an undertone of sympathy as he said, "You're not looking too well. What are you planning to do, now?"

"I wish I knew. I've got to take it easy, and I can't stay here, and I don't know where to go. Perhaps to Prague."

"Rodnik is your home!"

Karel shrugged.

Kravat prodded, "The houses of your brothers aren't large enough?"

"You can't go on living as a guest."

"You've got a share in the Benda Works!"

"I haven't asked Joseph for money."

"That's stupid. He's got it. This plant is back in full production and the glass is sold as fast as we can make it."

Karel shook his head.

"We need a doctor," Kravat said flatly. "Old Moser is dead. The Nazi who took his practice ran off, not that he was much good. The nearest doctor is in Limberk. There's nobody here."

"I know."

"Think about it!" Kravat jammed the bar once more into the pan and stirred the shimmering sirup. Then he lifted the end of the bar and through his shield watched the drops of glass drip off it, like honey from a spoon. Satisfied, he withdrew the bar and closed the work hole.

"A doctor," said Karel, "isn't just hands and a head. All I have is an old black bag with a stethoscope, a thermometer, two rolls of gauze, and a tube of Vaseline. The Nazi ran, but he shipped off his equipment first."

"Go to your brother! Get the money!"

"You can't buy that equipment today, with all the money in Czechoslovakia! A doctor without instruments is like a glassblower without a furnace, or a grinder without a wheel. Where am I going to get a fluoroscope, an X-ray machine, microscopes, or even something as simple as a surgical knife?"

"Do you want to stay here?"

"Somebody's living in my old apartment. A family — can't throw them out."

"I asked you — do you want to stay here, and work?" The melter's tone had changed. He was almost impatient, but with the impatience of authority.

"And if I said Yes?"

"I told you, times have changed. They're going to change more. We need a Works doctor at Benda. We've never had one, but he's needed. We need a doctor for the refineries. We need a doctor for Rodnik. We'll get you a house if we have to build it with our own hands. And we'll get you the equipment if we have to steal it."

"Who's *We*?"

Frantisek Kravat lifted his bar and banged open the next work hole. He said nothing because his teeth were once more holding the protective shield.

Karel waited. When the shield dropped down to the melter's chest, he repeated, "Who's *We*?"

"The union, the Works Council, all of us . . . the people . . ." Kravat said offhandedly. It did not occur to him that Karel needed a few seconds to understand anything so obvious.

CHAPTER FOUR

IMPERVIOUS to the screeching of the carborundum wheels biting into the crystal glass, Otakar Blaha bent to the geometrical precision of his grinding. His hands were holding a heavy bowl to the wheel turning vertically in front of him. The bowl, weighing a good eighteen pounds, was one of a series of six ordered from Vesely's by some potentate in Egypt or Syria. There was only one man in the refinery who could handle these difficult pieces, and that man was Otakar Blaha.

He was a little, wiry man whose squinting, nearsighted eyes were trained to follow sharply the most intricate curves and lines and dots and crosses and stars. He had developed an uncanny sense for the glittering, cool beauty of the abstract figures he had been cutting into furnace-blown hollow glass for some fifteen years; and his pleasure in this beauty made him forget the pain that sometimes welled sharply from his sore, red, swollen elbows to the tips of his fingers.

He saw no other beauty. He had no time to raise his head to the hills beyond the factory or to the clear, pale blue square of sky framed by the window facing him. He was oblivious to everything — to the other eight men sitting with him behind the tubs and wheels placed parallel to the window wall, to the room's dank smell which, despite the open window, shut out the crisply pleasant autumn air.

Blaha tackled a new section of his bowl. He had to lean more heavily on his elbows which were resting on the board of wood that lay across the rim of the tub. He bit hard. Sometimes he had the feeling that his elbows supported the full weight of his work, that only the elbows were working while the rest of his body floated lightly in space together with the stars and rays he was cutting into the glass.

The water in the tub beneath the board was cold and gray with glass dust and particles of sand. The board itself was wet and slippery. Above the board, suspended over the continually turning wheel, was a water tap. A piece of string leading into a small paper trough extended from the tap to the cutting edge of the wheel. A thin stream of water flowed along the string, dampening the cutting edge, cooling the wheel, cooling the screaming glass, and wetting down the dust to keep it from flying into Blaha's lungs. The water collected in the freshly cut grooves of the glass, not in sufficient quantity to fall by its own weight into the receiving tub, but just enough

to drip along Blaha's wrists and raised forearms and to stay at his elbows. So his elbows and arms and hands were cooled and remained cold, had always been cold ever since he could remember; he rarely noticed it and never gave it a second thought.

But today, the cold seemed to numb him; his hands trembled, his fingers felt dead; he had to slow down his work, pause, and hold up the heavy piece of lead glass before placing it back to the wheel.

He was frightened. Fourteen hours of work had already been invested in this bowl. There was no making mistakes for a glass cutter; what is cut, is cut. He was being paid by the piece, and he was being paid at a good rate. One hesitation of the hand, one slip of the elbows, and he would feel it in his pay envelope come Friday.

He put down the bowl. He got up from the high stool on which he had been crouching. With shaking fingers, he lit one of the four cigarettes he allowed himself per day, and walked up and down behind the row of grinders. They were working steadily; even the young boys who were hardly out of school and were learning the trade by cutting only the same simple lines around a glass or a little ash tray did not look up from their task. He envied them. What did these small pieces weigh? Nothing.

He looked at the old-fashioned clock which once had hung on the wall of Vesely's first house, when old man Vesely still operated a wheel himself. Two brass cylinders, hanging from chains, pulled down the seconds and minutes and hours. It was always difficult for Blaha's nearsighted eyes to read the exact time from the Roman numerals on the face of this clock.

He climbed back on his stool. With his ill-shaped, almost clawlike hands he reached for the bowl. There was the star on which he had been working, two of the diagonal rays still missing. He twisted himself into position. He slowly raised his hands to the exact level of the wheel and set the bowl to it. He listened with grim happiness to the first screech of the wheel cutting into the glass.

Then there was another pain. The bowl dropped, and he heard it crack.

Otakar Blaha, elbows still on the board, stared at his empty hands, let his head sink into them, and wept.

This was a rich, mellow autumn. It was as if the weather, sunny and mild, wanted to make up for the trials of spring and summer. The farmers at the foot of the hills were finished with their harvesting; it had been a good harvest, and they were plowing their fields for the winter wheat. The woods were reluctant to let go of their leafy pride, and the green of the pines which crowned St. Peter, St. Anna, St. Maria, and St. Nepomuk was deeper than ever.

In this air, the four peaks seemed to come closer to the town. Petra, standing in front of the schoolhouse, the full weight of the books in her bag dragging down her left arm, gazed vacantly at the hills. The instant the bell had sounded, the others had tumbled out of the building and, resuming their usual squabbles and overheated, childish disputes and confidences, had disappeared. They neither fought with her nor told her secrets. She was very well satisfied; her concerns lay elsewhere.

Her concerns lay with Karel, with Karel's feelings about her. She knew exactly how *she* felt about *him*; she had more than enough time to herself to think that out. She was determined not to show what she felt as long as everybody, including Karel, considered her a child. And she *was* a child; her own body told her so; she had to accept the evidence of the slanting mirror above the dresser in her room. She was resigned to having to wait until she could step forth, full-blown and ready. Every morning, she wished it were evening, every Monday that Saturday would come; each month passed was a month gained.

She ambled to the curb, set her right heel on its edge and with the tip of her shoe tried to reach the dried mud in the gutter. She should go home and have her afternoon milk. "Drink it," the maid would say as always, "it's good for you."

She balanced herself on the curbstone and began to walk carefully, setting heel to toe, heel to toe, and counting her steps. If they came out uneven at the corner, she'd go home to the maid and the milk. But if they came out even, she'd go up to St. Nepomuk and try to see Karel. And although he might behave noncommittally, now, she knew how it would be on the day when he saw her as Petra, the woman. She knew what she would say at that hour and how she would act, down to the last gesture and expression.

The books tended to throw her off balance. If she stepped into the gutter, the whole deal was off —

"Petra!"

There — the damage was done. She turned angrily.

"I've been watching you all the way down the street," said Thomas. "Playing a game?"

"No!" she said, and compressed her lips.

"Having a bet with yourself, then?"

If he guessed that much, he might even guess the whole truth! "I didn't know you were down here," she said hastily.

"I had to go to the post office. I've written a story for a big magazine in Prague, a story on America, and I sent it off."

"Yes?" She hesitated. "Kitty up at the house?"

"Uh-huh."

"Uncle Karel, too?"

"Uh-huh."

Even — uneven . . . if only she had reached the corner, she would know what to do.

"Why don't you come up with me?" he asked.

She said nothing, swinging her books.

"Well — " he raised his brows — "you're up there practically every other day — why not today?"

She blushed. "I'll come with you," she agreed haltingly.

"All right! Let's go!" He went ahead, his gait easy. He didn't seem to care whether or when she caught up with him. Petra fell behind, her forehead creased in thought. So he was aware of how often she came to St. Nepomuk. . . .

At the bridge over the Suska River he stopped and waited. "You should always drop in on me, too, when you visit," he admonished.

The crease vanished. He knew she came to the house, but he didn't know why. Testily, she remarked, "Kitty says you can't be disturbed."

A frown glided over his face.

He must be lonely, too. The conclusion made Petra feel expansive, and she stuck close to his side as they walked uphill, leaving the houses of Rodnik behind them. She decided she liked Thomas very much. He was never condescending to her; never asked her to fetch and carry, and talked sensibly to her. He was a lot nicer than Kitty, anyhow.

Thomas nudged her. "What are you brooding about?"

"People don't always feel talkative," she said wisely. "Do you?"

"No. But I'm older."

"People stress age too much. You're as old as you feel. There are days when I feel very old, at least as old as Kitty."

"Kitty? Do you think she's old?"

She watched him. His steps were no longer brisk, and he was breathing hard. "Sometimes," she answered. "But sometimes I think she behaves very childishly."

"Oh, she does? When?"

"When she's with Uncle Karel."

He was smiling; a labored smile, Petra found. She sympathized with him. Thomas was handling Kitty's capers wonderfully. He was biding his time, acting as if he didn't see anything. Or — and the idea disturbed her — perhaps he actually didn't see it?

"The way she dances attendance on him," she said critically, "he'll never get well."

Around a bend in the road, the black-tiled roof of the house showed between the trees. Thomas stood still, blinked a little in the glare of the

afternoon sun, and dried his forehead. Then he said matter-of-factly, "You know something, Petra? I believe you're jealous."

She laughed as if his statement had been too funny for words. It was a strident laugh, and its sound made him uncomfortable. The kid has been needling me, he thought, and I let her. He strode forward again, annoyed with himself and with Petra, and also with Kitty.

He hurried along the hawthorn hedge that was almost man-high and needed trimming. Where the hedge divided into a gateway, he entered upon the graveled footpath leading to his house, and stopped. On the sunny side of the lawn, Kitty and Karel sat in garden chairs, playing Chinese checkers. Heads bent over the board set up on the small table between them, they seemed thoroughly absorbed in their game. Karel's old American battle jacket was slung over his shoulders, and the way he wore it made it look jaunty rather than bedraggled. There was on Kitty's face the reflection of a gay moment still being savored. A gentle wind stirred the leaves strewn on the lawn and rustled in the trees of the woods of St. Nepomuk rising behind the house.

"Hello, there!" called Thomas.

The heads came up. Kitty waved and smiled. Karel's chair creaked as he leaned back with the air of someone completely contented. "Hello, Petra!" He stretched. "Back already, Thomas? You must have flown."

Thomas checked with his watch. "I was gone an hour and a half," he said, walking over. "I don't see how anyone can play at that idiot's delight for so long." He scrutinized the board. "I did try to teach Kitty chess, but she isn't very logical."

"She's been beating me. all right," Karel informed. "Besides, I suppose it all depends on what you see in a game. It relaxes me. I had no idea I could be this relaxed and let time and everything go by." He laughed. The battle jacket slipped off his shoulders and came to lie over the back of the chair. He flexed his arm, which was still pitifully thin. "Look, I'm getting full of vim and vinegar, sitting in the sun!" And turning to Petra, "You want to try my muscle?"

Petra had sauntered over, following after Thomas. "No, thank you," she said primly. Karel's superficial "Hello!" had throttled her impulse to run up to him, and Kitty's smile of sweet welcome sickened her. Now Kitty was holding out her hand to Thomas. He fondled it lightly and let go of it. Kitty moved one of her marbles — she was playing blue — and in three jumps landed in Karel's home triangle.

"We'll be through soon," Kitty said with a tinge of regret. The serenity of the afternoon was crumbling.

"Never mind!" Thomas was magnanimous. "Play! I've got work to do. Did the stationer send up the two reams of paper?"

"No . . ." said Kitty, surprised.

"Well, didn't you call him up? I asked you to, this morning!"

"Blame me," said Karel, "I've been monopolizing her."

"Don't you apologize; it's not your fault! . . . Kitty, how do you expect me to write without paper?"

"I forgot. I'm sorry." Queer that she forgot. Why? Because of these silly marbles that were being pushed over a board? There had been something so pleasant, so companionable about the game with Karel that her mind had pigeonholed everything else, including her chores for Thomas. "When I remembered, it was too late. And I thought since you were at the post office — and the stationer's is just around the corner . . ."

Thomas's face grew peaked. "I'll call up myself," he said, but made no effort to go.

Karel placed his yellow marble. Kitty once more hunched over the board. Petra saw her fingers come close to Karel's without actually touching them. There was, to Petra, something sensual about Kitty's hand. It revolted her, as did the plainly visible shape of Kitty's bosoms which she had always envied. But she could find no reaction on Karel's face; he was studying the changed position of the marbles. She followed his eyes; she saw the many openings he had; and she suddenly knew that he was throwing the game to Kitty, and that for all the suggestiveness of the fingers, for all the bosomy wriggings, he wasn't taking Kitty seriously.

"And there's another matter, Kitty. You told Petra to keep out of my study. Well, I like her to visit me. When I want people to stay out of my hair, I'll tell them myself."

"Yes, Thomas." She jumped her marble with unruffled deliberation, but her ears were reddening. If only she hadn't told Karel that Thomas had forbidden her to enter his study! "Your move, Karel!"

He played mechanically, wondering if Thomas nagged at her just as much when no stranger was living in the house. However — the stranger's presence must heighten the tension.

"I've brought you a visitor!" Thomas's tone was mildly censoring.

Karel looked up at his brother. He saw nothing vicious in Thomas's expression, only petulance, an almost childish hurt. He decided to take the reproach as if it had been directed at him instead of at Kitty, and said, "I know Petra is here. . . . I promised you a walk, Petra — but don't you think it's a little late for today?"

"I've had my walk, with Uncle Thomas!" Petra announced. "I believe I'll go home, now."

"Nonsense!" scowled Thomas. "I brought you up here; you're *my* guest. Do you want some hot chocolate? Shall we go into the kitchen and make some —"

Kitty got up. "I'll do it. For all of us. Or do you want coffee? Petra, please, finish the game for me." She was at the door of the house before Thomas reached it.

Petra fell into the captured chair. She set up a new game as if she were sweeping the board clean of every last trace of Kitty. When the marbles again were in marching order, she held out her closed fists to Karel.

Karel came to. "I thought — but we were not yet finished!"

"You were losing," said Petra, her resentment gone, "it was no fun for you! Which hand do you pick?"

Lightly, he tapped her left fist.

She opened it. "You've got yellow again. I like blue. Blue is a good color for you, too. A blue tie — for your birthday? Your eyes are gray, your hair is gray, blue and gray is a lovely combination."

"Am I very gray?" he inquired, making the conventional opening moves of the game.

"I like it. Now that you're a little tanned and your face isn't just bones, it looks very handsome." She pushed one of her marbles so as to block his progress. "Uncle Karel — why didn't you ever marry?"

"I guess I didn't find the right girl."

She kept her gaze to the marbles. "And the right girl — what would she have to be like?"

"Honestly, Petra, I haven't thought much about it."

She took a deep breath. She saw that her last two moves had been wrong, but that was unimportant. She was at a crossroads in her life. She began a circumspect description of herself as she imagined she would be three or four years from now. He seemed to be listening, and occasionally he would nod and grunt approval.

I'm a fifth wheel, he kept thinking under her chatter, a fifth wheel, turning and consuming energy and supporting nothing.

"Uncle Karel — women grow old faster than men, don't they?"

"Uh-huh. . . ." I must snap out of it. But there is all the time in the world to be busy and to thresh about. Now I want some peace — I want more of what I felt this past hour and a half. Peace and rest. I don't want to care for others, I want somebody caring for me, not just breakfast and making the bed, but talking to me when I need to be talked to, and knowing exactly what to say and the tone in which to say it —

"Uncle Karel!"

"Yes?"

"Your turn!"

"Sorry."

Petra blanched. He hadn't been listening. How could she repeat the things she had been saying? They'd sound flat and unreal. And there was Kitty

again, coming across the lawn, sprightly and bright, as if she had no other business on earth than to flutter about Karel.

"Coffee is ready, and hot chocolate for you, Petra."

"In just a moment," said Karel, with some bad conscience about his inattentiveness to Petra and the game. He jumped one of his yellows. "I've got to win this. My first winning game today!"

Petra caught the scent of Kitty's perfume. She could feel Kitty leaning against the back of her chair. The marbles blurred before her eyes.

Kitty reached over her shoulder, picked up a blue marble, jumped it over two others and landed it at the apex of Karel's triangle. A perfect move. "There, Petra—" she said. "Does that help?"

Petra sprang up. "Keep your fingers out of my game! Leave me alone! Leave Karel alone!" The board clattered off the table, the table tipped over, the blue and yellow marbles rolled through the grass.

Kitty stared helplessly from the child to Karel and back.

Karel righted the table. "That's a quick way to end the game—" He stopped. Petra's face was quivering and the tears were heavy on her lashes.

She wanted to flee. She had spoiled everything. She should have annihilated Kitty, but she had behaved like a child. She couldn't flee. The garden path was blocked by a man.

"Excuse me!" the man said, doffing his cap. He was cutting across the lawn toward them. "Good afternoon. I hope I don't come at a bad time . . ."

"Do you want to see someone?" Kitty questioned.

"This is Frantisek Kravat," Karel rose, "a friend of mine. No—any time you come you're welcome. This is my brother Thomas's wife." Then he turned to Petra. "And this is—" He'd better not insist on formalities. He said softly, "Now you go inside and wash up, Petra. Swollen eyes aren't any too pretty at the table. After your chocolate, you'll pick up the marbles."

Petra averted her face from the stranger and stalked to the house, smudging her cheek with the back of her hand.

"I did come at a bad time," said Kravat. "To tell you the truth, I've been standing at the hedge for quite a while. I hated to break in on you."

"Won't you join us for coffee?" asked Kitty.

Krvat looked down at the bulging knees of his worn pants. "Thank you kindly. I came directly from work, as you see. And I only came to bring a message. . . . Karel, we need a doctor. Today. Now." He bent down and began to gather up the marbles.

"Please, Mr. Kravat!" Kitty said into the awkward pause. "Leave them there."

"I thought I'd save the young lady some trouble. . . . Can we count on you, Karel?"

"But you know I have nothing to work with, even if I wanted to!"

"Perhaps you *can* help," Kitty suggested. "It may be an emergency, an accident."

The lines around Karel's mouth hardened. He was very conscious of her expectancy. "Was it an accident, Kravat? Where? In the Works?"

Kravat poured the marbles from one hand into the other. "It was an accident — but nothing very messy. And not at the Benda Works."

Karel seemed relieved, "What is it — a burn? A cut? Loss of blood?"

"Neither."

"Well — don't move the man. I can't do anything about internal injuries. Call the ambulance from Limberk."

"It isn't internal injuries." Kravat put the marbles on the table. He lifted his right hand and slowly cramped it into a claw. "It's this."

"Grinder's Hand —" said Kitty.

Kravat nodded. "It's Blaha, at Vesely's."

"Blaha!" Karel ruffled his hair.

"Poor man!" said Kitty.

"Do you know him, ma'am?"

"No."

Suddenly angry, Karel turned on Kravat. "You know that doesn't come in one day! And how can I help him? There's not a thing a doctor can do about it, with or without instruments. Why didn't he stop grinding long ago?"

Kravat shrugged. "Who can afford to live without working? Maybe you can — but none of us. We don't want to bother you. It's just your opinion we have to have, your medical opinion. For a claim the union is going to make against Vesely's."

"Against Lida Benda?"

"Yes."

If Kitty weren't around it would be so much easier to say No. And he had to refuse. Once you started, there would be no end to it. Tomorrow, they would call him for a real emergency, and day after tomorrow he would have to keep regular hours on Thomas's lawn. And, of all things, to start doctoring again with a fight against Lida and Joseph — involving himself right off, on this side or that. He had chosen sides once, by Christ he had, and that had been enough.

He threw the problem to Kitty, as a last and probably futile resort. "Kitty — do you think I'm well enough to begin practicing?"

"No." She lifted her face to his. "But that's not what's worrying you."

"You're right. It's not," he admitted.

Kravat was again picking up marbles. "Glass," he muttered. "Blue and yellow glass — damn it! . . . Excuse me, ma'am."

Blaha, thought Karel, with half a dozen kids and stooped shoulders and a small voice. Tireless and devoted and loyal. Years in the underground at his side — the side of Dr. Karel Benda, retired, currently a player of Chinese checkers.

"When would you want me, Kravat?"

"Tomorrow, at twelve sharp, in front of Vesely's."

He would give his medical opinion. That was his duty. But no more than that! Let them take his opinion and do with it what they pleased. "All right," he said grudgingly.

Kitty took his hand. "Let's go in for coffee, now. You're sure, Mr. Kravat, that you won't have a cup with us?"

"Oh, I'd like to, you know that, ma'am. But I really must get back to my furnace."

Joseph counted his blessings. It was nice to do; it rarely happened that he could afford the leisure to sit back and think things through and do some rough accounting.

The currency reform had come, exactly as he had expected it would. Everybody's old crowns, issued by the *Protektorat Böhmen und Mähren*, had been called in, and the fools who hadn't been able to get rid of them now had large deposits in the banks and couldn't touch their accounts. Every man Jack in the Republic had had to start out anew on an equal footing, with five hundred new crowns, no more. Except that those like himself, who had their money invested in plant and machinery and salable merchandise, had beaten the racket. He had beaten it coming and going, because the money he had used to build up Benda and to fill his storage sheds wasn't his own but the bank's. He would repay it in devalued new crowns, one third the value of the loan he had taken out. It was a dog-eat-dog proposition, a rat race; he had been out of it for six years and had to make up for his losses; yet the six years had paid off, after all — they had given him a new approach, a fresh perspective that was most helpful.

He jotted down the figures of his gains. He was accustomed to dictating; when he wrote by hand, alone in a room, he cocked his head like a schoolboy, his lips moved, and his forehead puckered with concentration.

His gains were on paper, of course, and they wouldn't be even that if some ignoramus in Prague or the district center of Limberk should insist on questioning the ownership of Benda. This fear had taken on almost physical form; it had a face like a nightmarish woodcut, it romped on his pad like a hobgoblin, scrambling the sensible, excellent, accurate figures on the white sheet before him.

He blinked and wiped his eyes. The figures were clear again. He drew a line and wrote down laboriously, *Dolezhal*: and in quotation marks, "*I've*

spoken to the people in Limberk. Everything is under control. Just a question of paper work."

Dolezhal was powerful—but how powerful was he with all of the country's institutions constantly shifting, authorities in flux, forces maneuvering? Over the telephone, Dolezhal had sounded confident enough, emphasizing his words so decisively that Joseph could visualize the short, stabbing gestures of the small, white hand. "*Nationalization? I've told you before, Benda—basic industries only, and in others from three to five hundred workers up.*"

He must send Dolezhal that whisky decanter and dozen glasses, and give orders to have the design discontinued. It must be the only set of its kind, even though he would lose money by it. "*You must come to Prague soon, Benda. I've talked to some of the men in my party about you, your personality, your ideas. They were very much impressed.*"

At the time of the call, it had seemed like an aside. It didn't, now that Joseph had analyzed every word, every shade of meaning in the Minister's remarks. The world was not bounded by St. Peter, St. Anna, St. Maria, and St. Nepomuk. There was life outside the petty routine of a provincial manufacturer, even a successful one.

Perhaps he should get out of this rut of Rodnik, away from living and working with the unsmiling Lida, away from the stern, demanding eyes of his dead father's portrait. Once he had had dreams of a different life; his father had buried them under. There had been Magda Tessinova of the National Theater—I wonder what became of her, I haven't read of her since I came back. Dark-haired Magda, slim and olive-skinned and deep-voiced, what could you have expected her to do with a glassmaker from Rodnik except laugh at him?

Joseph drew another line. The pencil broke.

He walked unhurriedly over to Vesely's Cut Glass, accepting the respectful greetings of the people, tipping his hat in return. The falling leaves were beginning to gather where the wind blew them into corners and against walls; he would have liked to drag his feet through them, to listen to the soft, scuffing sound this would make; but he didn't.

He went straight into his wife's office, the neatest, most impersonal office he had ever seen; even the potbellied stove in the corner looked as if, come winter, it would radiate prim cold instead of comfortable heat.

Three men were conferring with Lida. He asked himself why Karel was among them, but had little time to speculate. It could be nothing good—Kravat, that character from the Works Council at Benda, was there. The third person he did not know; it was probably a worker at Vesely's.

Lida said, "I called you, but you had just left."

Joseph hung up his hat. Lida had a simple hanger arrangement — a board on the wall, with wooden knobs sticking out. You had to hang your hat in a certain way or it would fall off; the thing annoyed Joseph every day.

"I'm usually here at one," he said laconically. "What brings you here, Karel?"

"He's been examining Blaha," Lida supplied the answer. Her eyes were narrow; she was leaning slightly forward over the desk as if she were defending it; her permanent was fresh and the pins still stuck in the curls; her hair looked like the wig on a beauty parlor dummy.

"You're Blaha?" asked Joseph, shaking the man's hand and feeling it lumpy and misshapen in his own. "What's wrong with you?"

Kravat, his baggy pants tucked into soldier's boots, greeted Joseph casually and suggested, "Suppose we begin at the beginning."

"Blaha has broken the bowl for Noukri Pasha," Lida said flatly. "The sixth one in the set. We have no uncut spares; that means we'll have to have new ones blown. All the expense!"

"Noukri Pasha —" said Joseph. . . . Some fat oriental with six wives — a bowl for each one of them — who smoked a narghile in a cool garden with palm trees and who didn't know what upsets he was causing in Rodnik. . . . "Yes, quite an expense!"

"But why did he break it?" said Kravat. "That's precisely the point!"

"You're here officially?" asked Joseph.

"I'm the executive secretary of the union."

Joseph looked at him. He doubted whether Kravat could spell properly. "I thought you were just the head of my Works Council," he said without particular rancor. "The /'ve promoted you?"

Kravat smiled slightly. "I've been executive secretary since the liberation, Mr. Benda. We haven't had any dispute with you — otherwise you might have known."

"Are you planning to start one?" Joseph shot back.

This man Kravat had spoken mildly enough, but there was an undertone Joseph didn't like, and he was going to put his foot down right here and now. He respected his workers; he respected Kravat as a melter; the man had a beautiful knack for adding just the right amount of the right material on a job for which only the vaguest kind of formulas existed — but this had nothing to do with his not knowing where he belonged.

Kravat was pulling a small cigarette holder out of his pocket, one of those cheap gadgets made of paper and a piece of goose quill, and was beginning to chew on it.

"I want to get along with my workers," Joseph said programmatically. "You know that from my dealings with you people of the Works Council

at Benda. I'm sure that my wife is of the same mind, as far as Vesely's is concerned."

"She wants to fire Blaha," said Kravat, the holder still between his teeth.

Lida threw back her head. Not a curl on it moved. "What else can I do? Karel — you've looked at his hands. . . ."

Joseph recalled the odd feel of Blaha's hand; it had been like a dead rooster's foot. He studied Blaha. A man in his best years — the face was distraught, the mouth hung half open, and once or twice, his Adam's apple moved convulsively. Grinder's Hand. Joseph needed no explanations from Karel; the man was through.

But Karel proceeded methodically, shutting out any personal feeling about Blaha, and letting the scientific evidence speak for itself.

"Look at his elbow — there's a nerve here, the ulna nerve. Because the elbow is the focal point in grinding, this nerve is frequently damaged. When that happens, the muscles of the hand begin to atrophy." He picked up Blaha's limp hand and moved the crooked fingers. "See the grooves between the bones? See this? — the muscle between thumb and forefinger is almost gone!"

Blaha stared at his hand. His father had had such hands, and probably his grandfather, too. It came with age. After a certain number of years at the wheel — no one knew how many — your hands got that way.

Karel dropped the hand. "He'll have to stop working. That's the long and short of it."

"Just as I told you!" insisted Lida. "A man's health comes first. And we can't afford this kind of breakage."

"What's he going to do instead?" asked Kravat.

"That's the union's affair," Lida said with finality, and sat down behind her desk. "There is some insurance in such cases, isn't there? I'll tell the bookkeeper to make out the necessary forms."

Karel contemplated his sister-in-law, her set mouth, her flat nose, her efficient hands with their square-cut nails. "He's got a family to support —" he began, and immediately checked himself.

"It *is* the union's affair," confirmed Kravat. "We're making it our affair. Right now."

"Yes?" Lida flashed her silver tooth. "I'm afraid this isn't the place. This is not one of your union meetings."

She's really a bitch, Karel thought. But Joseph won't let her get away with it. Joseph is basically a decent person — if he weren't, he would have made his peace with the Nazis as so many other businessmen had. And Joseph has some personal relation to his workers. If a man had worked for the Bendas all his life, Joseph would try to help him.

Karel waited. Joseph stood to the side, hands in his pants pockets, displaying boredom.

"I am sorry," Blaha broke in. "I am sorry —"

"What are you sorry about!" Karel's voice was tight.

Blaha frowned. What was he sorry about? How come the muscles in his hand were shriveling? The elbows — yes, the elbows. . . .

"Dr. Benda!" Kravat had bitten through the goose quill and threw the cigarette holder into the wastebasket. "I would like to know if Blaha could work in some other capacity. Could he?"

Karel felt Joseph's heavy-lidded glance. Joseph is faking, it went through his mind, reluctantly. That indifference is a front. Lida is fighting his little battle, and there's more at stake than Blaha's job. And I'm in the middle. They've put me on the spot again.

"Could he, Doctor?" pressed Kravat.

Blaha's claw tugged at Karel's sleeve, timidly. "But what will I be good for, Doctor? I've been a grinder all my life."

He couldn't shrug the man off. Nor could he be like Joseph and feign indifference in the face of the man's harried, wounded eyes. "Blaha —" he said — "now this is my medical opinion: You can work anywhere but at the grinding wheel."

"Well, that settles it —" Kravat, boots squeaking, stepped closer to Lida's desk. "It's a simple thing, Mrs. Benda. You'll employ him somewhere else at Vesely's."

"I've got a handyman and I've got a janitor. Do you want me to throw either of them out of work? . . . I'd like to help Blaha — believe me!" She had Kravat where she wanted him, and a little sympathy cost her nothing.

Karel saw that Kravat was caught. Kravat was in no position to recommend that one man be fired so as to place another. Karel still waited for Joseph. Joseph seemed to have fallen asleep on his feet.

"If you want to help the man, Lida —" Karel spoke heavily — "he could learn to paint glass, for instance. He still has some control over his fingers, and the likelihood is he'll regain more of it, in time. . . ."

"Paint?" Lida smiled thinly. "That's very delicate work!"

"So he won't do the fine designs! You have a big enough painting department at Vesely's, Lida!"

"I could learn!" said Blaha. He tried to straighten his fingers. "I'd be a good painter. I've always been reliable."

"I'm sure you'll be a good painter!" Karel smiled broadly, his lip stretching over the space where his teeth were missing. Tomorrow, yes, tomorrow he would take the train to Prague and have his mouth attended to. He saw Blaha struggle through to a hopeful grin; the grinder was back to being

the dogged little man he had known. He had taken Blaha out of the status of a case. He felt elated, as after a climb to a hilltop, resting, and looking back.

"Are you trying to tell Lida how to run her business?"

This had come from Joseph.

Karel's face went blank. "Why . . . no!" He floundered. "I'm just trying to act like a human being."

"Human, but not quite practical," Lida tossed in good-naturedly. "Blaha must learn to do something else — that's sensible. Let him learn to paint glass, why not? But how is he going to support a family? He'll have to start as an apprentice painter; it'll take him a year, at least, before he's any good at it — and meanwhile?"

"Meanwhile you'll have to pay him something close to his old wage," Kravat countered immediately. "We can't have a man penalized because he gets sick working for you."

Lida retorted, "That's his risk. Everybody takes it. That's why glass cutters get high rates."

But Kravat was sure of himself, now. He had something he could fight, and Karel had made his line solid. "Before the war," he began slowly, "and while you were operating under the Nazis —"

"Now, I wouldn't put it that way, Mr. Kravat!" objected Joseph.

"While the Nazis were here," Kravat went on, "your answer might have been all right. Now it's no good. Blaha did his share for you; now you do yours for him."

Joseph didn't mind Lida being pulled down a peg or two. He didn't mind Kravat talking tough; that was his job as a union official, and if he didn't make a lot of noise, he wouldn't be re-elected. But Karel was inexcusable.

"You won't be offended if I ask you something, Karel?"

"No."

Though his hands were still in his pockets, Joseph's face now was alert. "You're not back in practice, not that I heard of, Karel. You're not earning a penny. Aren't you a bit free with other people's money?"

Whose money? Who had made it for Lida? The questions were on Karel's tongue. But he didn't put them. He hadn't come to fight Joseph, nor anybody. He said soberly, "I was called on to give a medical opinion."

"Then stick to your medicine."

"Medicine is more than giving pills. And you know it."

"Is it throwing cues to Kravat? I'm sure Kravat is very capable of representing his own interests, and doesn't need a Benda to help him! . . . Mr. Kravat!" Joseph swung around. "There is no law obliging my wife to comply with your demand. Even our new Government recognizes that a private employer is not a social welfare agency."

He sat down on the corner of the desk, his back shielding Lida.

Kravat said, "If there isn't such a law, there ought to be one!"

Joseph's foot described small circles. "I quite agree with you. If I had anything to say about it, I'd be the first one to propose a law to take care of cases like Blaha's."

Karel refused to take Joseph's dismissal. "The fact still remains that Blaha was disabled working for Vesely's," he said sharply.

"Worked here for fifteen years!" added Kravat.

Patiently, Joseph tried a new tack. "That's the narrow view," he expounded. "The glass that Blaha cut in these fifteen years has gone through many hands. Many people have profited by it and made a living. The money Blaha earned he's spent in many ways — again, a great number of people profited by it and made a living. It isn't Vesely's that owes him help, now — it's all of us. . . ."

Karel was puzzled. Was Joseph trying to soft-soap Kravat? Or was he merely spurting ideas to any handy audience because he no longer could spurt them to Thomas?

Joseph's hands were sweating in his pockets. He was amazed at himself, at the ease with which he had spun out his amateur social theory, at the logic with which his thoughts followed one another. And what he had spoken was the gospel truth! From under his lids, he tried to gauge his listeners' reactions. Kravat appeared doubtful, but somewhat bewildered; and the edge seemed to be off Karel's animosity. . . . Maybe he was good at this kind of thing, and did have a flair for politics. Maybe he should have a bigger audience. Maybe Dolezhal was right!

"Yes," he repeated, "if I had anything to say about it, we'd have such a law!"

Lida was waiting for the peasant grin to spread over Joseph's face; he had delivered himself of an unexpectedly clever diversion, and she hoped it would work; but he always gave himself away with that smirk.

Joseph didn't smile. A plan was shaping up in his head. "As things are," he said, "you want Vesely's Cut Glass to finance Blaha until he's been retrained and can stand on his own — in other words, to make him a rather munificent gift."

"Put it any way you like," said Kravat.

Joseph turned to Lida. "Can you afford it, darling?"

She glared at him. "No!"

"If you'd let the union have a look at your books," Kravat suggested, "we'd show you how."

"Mr. Kravat, you'll just have to take my wife's word."

Kravat moved restlessly. Lida frowned with every squeak of his boots. "I thought you had learned something," Kravat was saying. "I thought

when the people took things into their hands in May, that showed you something. I thought — ”

Joseph interrupted him. “I don’t care what you think we should have learned, Mr. Kravat,” he said cuttingly. “And I don’t like threats. Now — here is Blaha. It isn’t his fault that his hands went bad on him; he shouldn’t be made to suffer. And here is Vesely’s Cut Glass, financially unable to keep him. . . . Blaha, I’ll tell you what I’ll do for you. Take a few days off, and Monday, you’ll report for work at Benda — at your old pay!”

He permitted Blaha to thank him. He put his hand on his wife’s shoulder and stood next to her, a little like the bridegroom on the wedding picture. He said to Kravat, “Let’s get together on such a law, sometime! In an industry like ours, and in times like these, the interests of workers and employers coincide more and more.” And as Kravat wouldn’t commit himself, he walked over to Karel and laughed, “You’d make a hell of a good Works doctor!”

“Very cozy idea,” Karel agreed. “All in the family.”

“But, unfortunately, it wouldn’t be right for me to hire you.”

“It wouldn’t be right for me to work for you,” said Karel.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE BLOW came without warning.

The second mail reached Joseph’s desk usually by three in the afternoon; with it came the Prague morning papers. He saw the headlines — they were black and prominent and practically identical in all the papers.

The President had signed the Nationalization Decrees.

The Decrees were modestly headed: *On the Nationalization of Mines and Some Industrial Enterprises*. The “some” caused Joseph to snicker. His eyes were held by a few of the sententious phrases that were printed under Benes’s name as an introduction to the decrees: *It was always clear to me that all modern wars must inevitably assume revolutionary aspects in Europe. . . .*

Must they? thought Joseph. And why must these aspects, so-called, always be turned against the few who were strong and bright enough to get ahead in the world? He read on: *There simply is, on the continent of Europe, a transition from pure Liberalism to a system in which the Socialist elements will have considerable weight or even preponderance.*

And how far would that go? Where was the limit to that preponderance?

Was there nobody to stop that nonsense? *We are one of those States, Benes had written lamely, which are mature enough and whose citizens are sufficiently enlightened not to have to be forced into any Socialistic measures by strikes, revolts, and conflicts, or even by a civil war. . . .*

Joseph scoffed. Small Nation talk — we've always aped our master's style. Time was when we used to be Imperial because in Vienna, they had a court; after 1918, we were conservative democrats because in Paris, they had that kind of Republic; then we went authoritarian because in Berlin they told us to; and now we're having a preponderance of Socialist elements because in Moscow —

What was that! He read again, his hands clammy, his fingers crumpling the page: *On the day of promulgation of this decree, the following enterprises are nationalized by transferring them to State ownership . . . two types of glassworks (all enterprises in existence on the day when this decree comes into force), to wit, all sheet glass factories, all glass furnaces. . . .*

All glass furnaces . . . ! No distinction as to number of workers employed — simply all glass furnaces. His work, for nothing! His planning, his foresight, his dealings with the bank — for nothing! The nights of lost sleep, when he had stayed up with the workers rebuilding the furnace — for nothing! His years in England, and the war — for nothing! The immolation of his youth and his dreams, his obedience to his father, his marriage to Lida, the complete identification of himself with a group of shabby buildings and a pile of *chamotte* bricks and the constant heat of gaseous flames — his whole life — for nothing!

The following enterprises are nationalized . . . all glass furnaces — by a stroke of the pen! . . . Where was Dolezhal? Dolezhal's assurances that only plants with more than three hundred workers . . . Dolezhal's intercessions with the District National Committee . . . Dolezhal's hints, *You must come to Prague soon, a man of your personality, your ideas. . . .* Yes, where was Dolezhal?

He was right here, at the end of the Decrees, his name along with the list of all the other Cabinet members. Just a politician hanging on to his seat. What a joke!

What a joke on me.

He got up. He shoved the newspapers off his desk. He pulled his chair to the wall and, controlling his wobbly knees with effort and using the top of the display case containing his models as support, he climbed on the seat. Then, with deliberate, strong strokes, he penciled a mustache on his father's clean-shaven, aloof face.

The office door opened behind him. He stopped, turned, almost fell off the chair, balanced himself, and blushing faced his wife.

Lida went to the wall cabinet in which he kept his stationery supplies. She rummaged for a moment and then came over to him. "Here's a good, soft eraser," she said.

He took it without a word, and went to work on the portrait.

"It won't all come off," he said finally.

She offered him her hand, and he climbed down. For the first time since she had entered, he dared to look into her face. It was soft, almost young, almost as it had been in the early months of their marriage.

"So you know?" he asked, still holding on to her hand.

She nodded.

"What'll we do?" he said. "It's inconceivable, absolutely inconceivable."

"We still have Vesely's," said Lida.

He noticed that she had said "We," and wanted to ask her about it but was afraid she might correct herself and say "I"; and so he said nothing.

There was the old leather sofa from Peter Benda's time which Joseph had resurrected from the attic after his return to Rodnik. He had had it placed next to the stove, and there it stood, old-fashioned and broad and solid. Lida sat down in its corner.

"We still have Vesely's," she said again.

He was holding the eraser between his fingers and kneading it. "*You* have it, and how long will you have it?"

She took the eraser from him. "Come sit with me," she said.

"I should never have come back! I should have stayed in England, or gone to America! Elinor Simpson would have fixed it for me. A sentimental idiot, that's what I've been!"

He saw her mouth get thin.

"I mean — I should have come and got you and Petra out of here, and that should have been the last I ever saw of this place and this ridiculous country! Where do they think they're going? Who'll run the Benda Works? Ministerial Councilor Novak?"

"You've had this argument with him before," she remarked.

"I don't deserve that kind of deal!" he stormed. "I've been a decent, loyal man. Why are they doing it? Why are they doing it to me?"

"Maybe you've been too decent and too loyal."

"First they take the Benda Works, then they'll take Vesely's, then they'll take the house and the car and our furniture and clothes, and then they'll take our child."

"Just like the Nazis!" she said.

"No, not like the Nazis! Herr Hammer wanted the Benda Works, and under the Nazis he got them and then we could take them away from him again. But these people are worse — they're not going to allow any private property at all! This is a permanent steal!"

Lida's face was drawn. "What are you going to do? Sit back here and wait until the Commissars come and order you out?"

"What can you do?" he sneered.

"Fight it! What did you do after Munich?"

He laughed in her face. He slapped her thigh so hard that she winced. "And who else is going to be in the fight? After Munich, yes — there were millions of people in this country who stood to lose everything. . . . Who d'you think is going to risk his neck now so that I can get back the Benda Works? Do you really expect us to have another underground, maybe, against the preponderance of Socialist elements? Do you really think somebody is going to make war so I can keep my property?"

She rubbed her thigh. "There's Dolezhal. . . ."

"Dolezhal!" He picked up one of the papers from the floor and with the back of his hand slapped the page with the reprint of the Decrees. "Dolezhal signed the whole thing!"

"With two dozen others. I'm sure he hated it. I'm sure he didn't enjoy going back on his own word to you. You're not the only one hit by this and by what's to come! Every shoemaker, every greengrocer, every peasant, everybody who owns as much as a sewing machine, is right with you. . . ."

"Damn few men own glass furnaces and mines and banks and steel mills," he retorted.

"People know this is only a beginning. People aren't that stupid."

"Maybe," he admitted — "maybe they aren't. But when the Commissars come and say: *Joseph Benda, get up from your desk*, I can't throw them out as I threw out Aloysius Hammer! They'd come right back, with a squad of police —"

"So we must arrange for a different text. Let them say instead: *Mr. Benda, you stay right here and carry on for us. You're a decent and loyal man and you know the glass business inside out and we need you.*"

Joseph looked at his wife. Her face was no longer soft or young; her eyes were hard and small, and the lipstick on her mouth could not give it a more generous shape. He took her hands into his like a man feeling a certain kind of love and lacking a better way of expressing it.

"Joseph," she said, "we've been too much apart."

"Yes," he said.

"Why do we have to be pushed into a catastrophe before we remember what we are to one another?"

"Yes, why do we?" he said gently.

She was thoughtful for a while. Then, without a trace of emotion in her voice, she suggested, "If I were you, I'd take the car and go to Prague and get busy."

"Yes," he agreed, "you're right."

In the yard, groups of workers were assembled, discussing the news in subdued and yet eager and excited tones. Kravat's angular frame stood out among them. The workers touched their caps as Joseph and Lida went by. Joseph, raising his hat, said "Good day!" and "How are you?" and smilingly received their mumbled replies.

"On such a day," someone said, "you might expect him to forget these niceties."

"On such a day," another answered, "he'd better be damned civil to us."

"He's always treated us right," said a third, an elderly man. "His father would take the skin off your back and curse you in the bargain, but this one's all right, always a kind word and a smile."

"I wonder how it'll be without him," said the first.

The plane from Paris cut down its cruising speed and for half a minute seemed to hang suspended in the soft oatmeal gray of the clouds. Then the gray fell behind, and under Elinor Simpson's eyes was spread the familiar, thousand-towered shape of Prague. There was the bend of the river and Charles Bridge, the statues lining it sharp and delicate like tiny chess figures; there was Hradcany Hill, with the spires of St. Vitus's Cathedral coming up at her at a crazy angle; the fading green of the Valdstyn Gardens, and the deep, black, crooked lines of the old streets.

I love this Prague! She had written that years ago, just before Munich, but she remembered the piece by rote although she must have pushed out close to two thousand columns since. *It is more beautiful than Paris, it has more life than London, it is the incarnation of Europe—it is Europe! I love this Prague and I shall do everything in my power to keep it free! May the compromisers in the Foreign Offices take note: Whoever has Prague, will have Europe.* . . . How prophetic she had been!

A hand was on her shoulder. "Fasten your seat belt, please. We're approaching Ruzyne Airport," said the stewardess.

"And don't I know it!" said Elinor, without for a moment turning her eyes from the view through the window. Mechanically, she reached for the two ends of the web belt and slipped them loosely together. She never pulled them tight. Her girdle was bother enough.

Her face was slightly flushed, and her breath was coming faster. It was not because they were losing altitude so rapidly; she was always gripped by this odd excitement when she came to Prague—so much of her life was tied up with it, the fight she had led and lost at Munich and won at Pearl Harbor; and poor little Czechoslovakia; and Thomas Benda.

She reached into her pocketbook and felt for the letter Joseph had written her about Thomas. He hadn't said much, but it had been enough, quite

enough to make her want to come over. And the New York papers had printed conjectures about this new thing brewing in Czechoslovakia, this nationalization.

The plane set down smoothly on the runway and taxied toward the hangar and stopped. She unfastened her seat belt and got up and was the first in the door, filling it majestically. She paused and waited; only a few men in Air Lines uniform stood at the foot of the ramp. No one was there to meet her.

"Go ahead, lady!" someone said behind her.

Joseph was probably inside the airport building, she thought and stepped out.

Inside were the customs men and the border police, and beyond the wooden barrier, a small group of friends and relatives of other passengers: nobody she knew. Maybe the Western Union in Paris had messed up the telegram.

The officials were checking her passport and going through her baggage. She had some soluble coffee and two cartons of teaballs and thirty packs of cigarettes and a small battery of toilet water and perfume bottles and jars of creams and a volume of T. S. Eliot's poetry which she never read but which she knew Thomas would enjoy. The customs man glanced at the things, closed her suitcase, and said in labored English, "Madame, you are ready." Since no porter was handy, he carried the bag through the gate in the railing.

And there was Joseph.

"Elinor!" He offered both his hands. "I'm so glad you could come! Terribly glad!"

He picked up her suitcase.

"Welcome to Czechoslovakia! I'm sorry I'm late; I'll tell you about that. You must be dead. I have my car outside —"

He was rushing her off and not giving her a chance to get in a word.

"What *is* all this?" she managed to say as he pushed her toward his car.

"Nice car, isn't it?" he said. "Used to belong to the *Kreisleiter* in Usti. Got it cheap."

He dropped her suitcase and her hat bag in the rear, and held the front door open for her. He banged the door shut, climbed in on the other side, pressed his foot on the starter, and was off.

"What's the matter with you?" she demanded.

He took off his hat and wiped his sweated face. "Now you can say something!" he chuckled. "I just didn't want you to talk too much at the airport. You never know who's around, these days."

She glanced at him sharply. "Is it that bad?"

"Perhaps it is, perhaps it isn't. The horrible thing is you can't tell."

"I thought this country had been liberated!"

"I thought so, too, until three days ago."

"And now?"

"Maybe it'll have to be liberated all over again."

They were entering the suburbs of Prague and driving through Dejvice. The festive precision of the outlines she'd seen from the air was gone. The small houses were strung drably along the road like gray beads on an old woman's dress, just as she remembered them.

But the man next to her had changed. He was keyed up, he spoke too fast and a little wildly. He used to be settled in his way, firm, almost sententious, and somewhat countrified. Perhaps it was his mood; or perhaps it was the war through which he had gone. She wondered about Thomas.

"Liberated from what?" she asked as she smoothed the sides of her shining gray hair.

"From the preponderance of Socialist elements," he said sarcastically. "Do you know that, as of this morning, I'm a government official?"

She had been fishing in her bag for a cigarette. She stopped. "What about your factory? You wrote me that it was taking up all your time."

"I had to see Minister Dolezhal; that's why I was late at the airport. He fixed my appointment as National Administrator of the Benda Works. I've been nationalized, Elinor."

She frowned. "They took it away and gave it right back to you? Doesn't sound so bad. . . ."

"You've got to have friends."

He stopped at a traffic light. As the light changed back to green, he stepped angrily on the gas. The car jumped forward.

"I've become a little cog in a big machine. I'll be sitting in the same chair, doing the same work, at one tenth my former income, and with every ignoramus in the district looking over my shoulder."

"I see."

"And I must be grateful on top of it! Others don't have it that good. I'm in a relatively favorable position — I was in the war, I've got a clean record as far as the Government is concerned, there's nothing against me in their files. So they're gracious enough to permit me to be used."

Elinor said with conviction, "But you don't think this thing's going to last?"

They came down Avenue King George VI; the traffic grew heavier; the lumbering streetcars had to be passed carefully.

"Will it last?" he replied. "How can it last! It's nonsense, economically, politically. And yet — for instance, there's a fellow named Novak — he's the evil spirit in Dolezhal's office — Communist, I suppose. What they get

their teeth into, they don't give up easily. Dolezhal's all right, though —

"He is, is he?"

"Don't you remember him? You must have met him in London. He's a great admirer of yours!"

"I meet so many prominent people —"

"We're being pushed, here; we're all being pushed. We'll have to sit tight and wait and see. For the present . . ."

"Yes?"

"For the present, we'll have to be good boys. If you're good, they'll reward you, because they need you."

He was crossing the Moldau River. "Beautiful, isn't it?" he said mellowly. "The sun going down, and the hills, and the gold on the river — that's still here, at least. . . ."

"What's Thomas saying about all this?" she asked.

"Thomas?" He shrugged with disgust. "What do you expect him to say about it? I don't know whether he cares; I don't even know whether he knows. He's going to find out, though, when his income stops coming in." He snorted to himself.

"But Thomas was so alive to these matters — it was always as if he had a personal relation to freedom!"

Joseph raised his brows. "Yes — when somebody told him to. . . . Perhaps you can bring it to his attention!"

They drove past the Powder Tower, last remnant of the old fortifications of Prague, down Prikopy Street where once the moat surrounding the Old Town had been, and turned left into Wenceslas Square and right again into Stephan's Street, and stopped in front of the Alcron Hotel.

Elinor slowly climbed out of the car. She was lost in thought. At the door, she reminded herself of Joseph's presence. "You will have dinner with me, won't you, Joseph?"

"If you'll be my guest," he said.

"I never could pack," Karel smiled. "It has a physical effect on me. I begin to sweat with fear and nervousness and my stomach gets restless — horrible! Nerves over packing!"

Kitty was folding Thomas's old robe which had been a loan and finally had become a gift. She put it into Karel's bag, on top of the three shirts he owned. "Please stay here," she said, as she had said it so many times.

The coppery light of the November sun came through the large balcony window of the room that had been his in his brother's house. It dimmed her outlines as she moved about from the closet and the bureau to the suitcase on the bed. He was leaning against the wall and wished she

would stand still for a moment so he could see her in this light, the transparency of her hair.

"It's time I went," he said slowly. "You've been so generous, both of you —"

"How will you get along in your new place?" she asked. "It's run down, I am sure, it'll need everything, and how will you keep it clean?"

"I promise you, I'll have a woman come in every three days to dust it off. And it isn't such a bad place. Kravat got it for me through the Works Council, and he wanted me to live decently so I can do my work."

"Kravat doesn't know what it means to live decently," she said. "How can he? His idea of the height of luxury is probably a leather-covered grandfather chair with frightful yellowed doilies for your head and arms."

"How did you know?" he laughed. "That's the prize piece among my furnishings. Kravat delivered it himself — God knows where he picked it up."

Kitty closed his bag and sat down next to it.

"These are his great days," Karel continued, "ever since the Decrees came through. It's really quite touching. He and, I would say, most of the men suddenly have developed a kind of personal feeling toward the old Works. . . ."

"They've always needed a Works doctor," Kitty observed calmly.

"Must be an odd sensation for Joseph to have me on his payroll. And without being able to order me around — without even having been consulted —"

"Now, I think that was wrong of them!" said Kitty. "I think that he's been taking the whole thing wonderfully. When you thought of the Benda Works, you thought of Joseph — and now, he is nothing —"

"He's the National Administrator!"

"They still could have asked him when they hire a doctor. They don't have to be rude about it."

"They didn't go out of their way to be polite with me, either. They said: Take it or leave it. So I took it. Wouldn't you have wanted me to?"

"Of course! . . . It was the best thing for you to do. But I think people's sensitivities should be considered, even today."

"Is that what Thomas feels?" asked Karel.

"I haven't talked it over with him. I told him you'd be starting out as Works doctor at Benda, and that you would have to live in town because of your hours."

"And?"

"And he was sorry you were moving out."

Karel felt a bitter taste in his mouth. It was as if he had done something wrong — but he knew he hadn't — and was being blamed for it.

He came over to her and said, "I wish I could have helped him on that novel. You're all so damned good to me —" Then he gripped the handle of his suitcase and began to cart it out of the room, down the stairs. It was heavier than he had expected with the things he had borrowed and some he had bought with borrowed money, and three or four times he tumbled against the curve of the wall.

Kitty called, "How will you get into town?"

"I spoke to Joseph," he said. "He's going to send the car around."

The bad taste in his mouth grew stronger. He shouldn't have asked Joseph; and Joseph shouldn't have been so noble about it.

Kitty came down to where he was standing. Together, they carried the suitcase down the rest of the stairs. Her hand was touching his, her fingers were alongside his, and he was beginning to be aware of it.

"Well," she said when at last they were in the entrance hall, the bag between them, "shall I call Thomas?"

"I guess so," he said awkwardly.

But she didn't go.

"Kitty?"

"Yes, Karel —"

"No more Chinese checkers."

"It's a silly game."

"And it's become too cold to sit in the garden."

Her eyes deepened.

"You've helped me a lot, Kitty. And I'm sure, with me out of the house, things will be smoother." He paused. "Thomas needs your help. More than I ever did."

"I know," she said tonelessly.

Karel looked at the watch on his wrist; this, too, was Thomas's. "If there's anything certain about Joseph," he said with attempted lightness, "it's that he's always on time."

Kitty touched his cheek and pulled back her hand. She turned quickly and knocked at the door of Thomas's study. Karel sat down on his bag.

Thomas appeared; his hair was tousled, his eyes swollen. "I've been working," he said, massaging his chin. "I don't know what it is — I write a few pages and get deadly tired. There's no pleasure in this work. I don't know where I'm at or what I'm aiming for. . . ."

"Karel is ready to leave," said Kitty, hooking her arm into Thomas's elbow and hanging on to him as if he could hold her.

Thomas nodded. "Why the great scene? He's not going abroad, he's not even going to Prague! He's staying in town! We'll see him!"

"Sure!" said Karel. "I'll be around. Whenever I need a home-cooked meal."

Kitty said nothing.

Thomas put out his hand, "Good luck in the new place. And don't strain yourself!" He laughed thinly. "At least you'll have a salary. No more Benda dividends for me! Now I'll have to hustle for my living. . . ." He pressed Kitty's hand. "It's not the first time that's happened to us, is it?"

They heard Joseph's car grind up to the gateway and stop. Karel opened the house door. He shook their hands, "Well — good-by. . . ."

Joseph came bouncing up the stairs. He was not alone. "I've a surprise for you!" he cried. "Thomas — here's Elinor Simpson!"

He stepped aside, so that Elinor could enter. She marched straight for Thomas. She threw her arms about him and kissed him resoundingly on both cheeks, in the manner of a Russian general greeting his colleague after a victory. Then she loosened her embrace. She held him at arm's length and examined him.

"You look terrible!" she said. "Wan! Positively wan! Haven't you been feeding him well, Kitty? Why didn't you write to me? I could have sent you everything! We've got an excellent canning industry in America —"

"How are you, Elinor?" said Kitty. "No, we've been having enough to eat. . . . You know Karel —"

"Karel!" Elinor said, "of course! You're the brother who stayed here during the war" — and turning back to Thomas — "Aren't you glad to see me?"

"Certainly!" said Thomas.

He was furious. He was furious at Joseph for having exposed him to this without the slightest warning, without a chance to prepare himself. The sudden meeting dug up the things he was still trying to bury — the whole mad glory of the Simpson-appointed, Simpson-created, Simpson-anointed Spokesman of poor little Czechoslovakia; the humiliating discovery that all of it was a business item in the Simpson stable of gifted young men; the attempts to free himself; the defeat and the realization that he was nothing without her guidance and connections. That came on the night train from St. Louis to Kansas City, with the telegram from Burrough's Lecture Agency canceling the rest of his tour. She had come into his compartment, *deus ex machina*, as if she had known of the telegram — and perhaps she had — and had taken him in her arms, and that night they had slept together, and afterwards, he had lain awake, despising and cursing himself and listening to the *rut-tut-tut-rut-tut-tut* of the Pullman wheels.

Kitty was ushering them into the living room, and Joseph was taking the bottles out of the cellaret and setting out the glasses.

"So you've been in Buchenwald, Doctor," Elinor was saying to Karel, her eyes appreciatively testing his still gaunt figure. "I've interviewed at

least a dozen people who were there. Do you know Kurt Fleischer? He was a German Social-Democrat and he's back in politics, now. He'll go places, a human dynamo, strictly. I suppose you are interested in politics?"

"Only to a very limited degree," said Karel.

"I wouldn't be so modest," Joseph countered with relish. "The ink wasn't dry yet on the Nationalization Decrees, when the union gave him a job as Works doctor at Benda. As long as I owned the plant, I wouldn't have dared to employ him. I know my workers. They would have said: He's the boss's brother, and even if you're dying he'll certify that you're in blooming health just so as to get you back to the furnace."

Karel kept his face to studied neutrality.

"Tell me, Doctor," Elinor Simpson leaned forward, listening, observant, "what do you think of this new development here? What's it going to lead to?"

"Socialism," he said.

"Don't you have to have a revolution for that?" she bristled.

Karel said lightly, "It's been quite peaceful until now —"

"I tell you there is no such thing as socialism," she stated firmly. "There is private capitalism and state capitalism. You can't share and share alike, because people won't work if they know that the next lazy fellow is going to get exactly the same as themselves. And if you have state capitalism, you only supplant one group of managers by another, and you lose your democracy to boot. So why go to all that trouble?"

Karel tried to follow her. Before his mind could straighten one fallacy, she had passed on to the next. She was amazing, like a figure from Mars; she was overbearing and pompous; and he was sure that, once the novelty of her personality wore off, she could be quite boring. And what was she repressed about? He had expected something different, and he thought sadly: If that's the person who, next to Joseph, has had the most influence on Thomas — no wonder!

Kitty brought a tray of sandwiches. She passed them around, but only Joseph ate heartily, munching, and moistening the bites with sips of brandy.

Kitty was silent. Karel suffered with her. Her anxious eyes told him the story — whatever was wrong between her and Thomas had its roots in America and this woman. Finally, Kitty said, "You'll stay at our house, Elinor? We've been your guests so often. . . . And it's a beautiful room, isn't it, Karel? With a lovely view of the mountains. Sometimes you look at them and they seem so close to you that you think you can touch them. . . ."

She was quoting Karel's line, but was not conscious of it.

Elinor said loudly, "I wouldn't dream of it, child! All this is much too

pretty up here in your little hide-out. Not a chance in the world! I'm staying at Joseph's."

But Kitty didn't seem relieved. After a moment or two, she asked, "How long are you planning to be in Rodnik? I mean — Thomas and I want you for dinner. . . ."

"How long? Child, I don't know! A few days, a week, or I may come back once or twice. I have a job to do, here, and who can tell when it will be finished?" Elinor turned to Joseph, "You run along, now. You said you had to drive the doctor into town. And I must have a talk with Thomas — a very serious talk," she added, jocularly.

She stood up and adjusted the comb at the back of her upswept coiffure. "Where can we have some privacy, Thomas?"

Thomas's study was roughly furnished. There were the shelves with his books and papers, his work table, a straight-backed chair, and a couch with crumpled pillows. A blanket, shoved aside, showed that he'd been lying down and had had no time to fold it up. The one distinctive piece was a fine Venetian mirror, fairly large, and placed in such a way that Thomas could look at himself from his chair. Sometimes he would act out a scene he was writing, speaking the words in a tense whisper, and watching his expression while he spoke.

Elinor settled comfortably on the couch, propping the pillows behind her. "What's that in your typewriter?" she asked.

"I'm working on something."

"Let me hear it —"

He improvised a translation of his current article in his American Impressions series. Having to translate made him nervous. Words in one language never fitted exactly the words in another; what had been a clever paragraph, with the filigree of his style, sounded trite and blunt in English.

After a while he broke off. She did not urge him to continue. He looked at her, expectant and apprehensive, and as she said nothing, he began to defend himself, "You understand — this is a first draft — and in translation . . ."

She was shaking her head. "Thomas darling," she said, "this is below your class."

He slammed down his manuscript.

She raised her hand. "I'm sure that the way you said it is perfect. You're a first-rate technician in your language and your craft; I wouldn't bother with you if that weren't so. It's not the way you said it, it's what you said."

"And you can point out where I'm wrong, I suppose!"

"You aren't wrong, Thomas darling! And even if you were, what differ-

ence would it make in a travelogue? Because that's what this is — a travelogue! — and you're too good for that kind of thing."

He gathered his papers, tapping the bottom of the sheets so that they fell evenly together, and put them in a folder. "They're sold and paid for," he said, "and I've got to earn money."

"You'll earn money with whatever you write. That's not the point. The point is that you have a reputation in your country, and I've made it world-wide, and you're squandering it. You live in the world's most fascinating spot, you're part of the farthest outpost of democracy, the decisions made here will affect all of Europe and us in America, too — and you write travelogues! Your country has just been liberated from Nazism, and it's become the most exciting testing ground: Freedom versus another, even more vicious, kind of dictatorship — and you write about juke boxes and the flavorings in ice-cream sodas. . . ."

There had been times when he had spoken similarly to himself, and his face had sneered back at him from the mirror.

"I wish," he said, "that you'd get out of my life."

Elinor crossed her legs. She had beautiful legs, and her fine nylons, her expensive, high-heeled American shoes, did the most by them.

"Suppose I did," she countered. "Suppose I left you alone. You'd have to find your way anyhow, and it would be the way on which I shall push you. But it would take you a lot of time, and we can't afford to lose time."

"I have the rest of my life."

She ignored his answer. "What other plans do you have?"

"I wanted to write a novel."

"That sounds better! On what?"

"I don't think I'll write it."

She grunted, as if she had expected this reply. Then she got up and placed herself between him and the mirror. "Now you listen to me! You're still the Spokesman! You've forgotten that your words —"

"Don't hammer at me, Elinor. In America, I was the Spokesman, perhaps. But when I came back here, I found other realities, a different struggle, and the people had become different from what I thought they were. Maybe that's my trouble. . . ."

"All the more reason to assert yourself! How can you hesitate! Don't evade! Don't pick little issues! . . . What is uppermost in the minds of people here?"

They want to be left alone, he said to himself. They're tired. After six years of beating against walls, they want to relax. . . . Like Karel. Just like Karel.

"Freedom!" she proclaimed. "Freedom, that's what they're worried about!"

His face was sullen, and he said nothing.

"Don't you see it, Thomas? This whole idea of socialization — not that it will ever work — it's a terrific temptation! They want to get the people to sell out their birthright for the pottage of security — jobs, medical care, old-age pensions. In return, they'll demand only one thing: complete subjection. No criticism. Toe the line. Take orders."

This was not exactly news to him. He had thought about it when he learned of the Decrees, and before that, when he'd heard of arrests, rather summary court proceedings, and executions. But the executions had been of people who had informed to the Germans, and so it was all right; and for the rest, there was Benes, and the Provisional National Assembly, and a dozen different newspapers with different views, and a number of political parties with their differing philosophies and interests.

"Do you think it doesn't affect you, Thomas? But I tell you you've been writing those travelogues because you knew they were harmless enough and wouldn't prejudice anyone against you. You could have published them even under the Nazis — right?"

She was right, and she wasn't. Nobody's gall would rise over anything in his articles. But that was not why he had chosen to write them. He just hadn't been ready to tackle a more complex project, by himself.

Why hadn't he been ready?

"You are not consciously submitting, Thomas — I'm not saying that. But you're sliding into it. And you were the Voice of Freedom — do you want me to quote some of the things you wrote?"

"When I worked for your American magazines," he said slowly, "I always had to think in advance of what they would accept and what they wouldn't. It's not so much different here."

"But it is! You're in your own country, Thomas darling, and you're a big man in your country. They'll take anything you say, and listen to you; that's your responsibility, and you're shirking it."

He thought of the night train from St. Louis to Kansas City. "Freedom . . ." he said bitterly. "What is freedom? Where does it begin, where does it end?"

"That's it!" she cried. "That's it exactly! That's the question that has to be answered — now, and in this country, and by you. Because thousands of people are asking it!"

She closed in on him, speaking tensely. "Freedom is no pretty young girl. Freedom is a gnarled and battle-scarred old man . . ." Somebody else had said that — who was it, Bryant? It didn't matter, Thomas wouldn't know, and the line fit admirably. "Freedom is never secure. You Czechs have been fighting for it through hundreds of years. Write about freedom, Thomas, and you'll be the greatest man in your country!"

Her eyes had fire, and it was obvious that at this moment she was in love with him. He saw all this with a detachment that amazed him. For the first time since she had come into his house, he was able to think clearly. She had a wonderful nose for news and for ideas that were in the minds of people. The whole secret of her success was this ability to swim with the stream, but to make it appear as if she were swimming slightly ahead of, or even against it.

"Write something about freedom?" he said disparagingly. "An essay, you mean? A tract?"

"Why not?"

Yes — why not? But the very fact that she had led him to the trough made him loath to drink from it. He wished the word *freedom* had never come from her lips. Why the hell hadn't she let him discover it himself?

"Because the subject is like an old deck of cards that everybody has played with, including yourself, Elinor. Because I've got other matters to worry about. Because I don't like it."

But what if I shuffled the deck once more and stacked it in a new way? What if I did write an essay of this kind and came to conclusions quite different from hers? . . . He could look at this shining thing, this freedom, for which so many men had died, and see what it really was. He could go back to the great philosophers of his country, to Hus and Comenius and Augustin Smctana. He could dig down to the roots of his people, to the revolutions from which it had risen, the battles in which it had bled, to one-eyed Jan Zizka and the men of Tabor, to the early Masaryk, and to those who had died a nameless death in the concentration camps of this war. And the monument he had wanted to build them in the novel he would never write would be all the finer and cleaner for the lack of the curlicues of fiction; it would be a beacon light for his time and his country.

His eyes focused. He noticed the self-satisfied air with which she was studying him. "How long will you be in Czechoslovakia?" he asked gruffly.

"I don't know — besides, Kitty asked that already. You're not very hospitable, Thomas." She laughed. She could afford his spite. She could read him as his brother, the doctor, might read an X-ray. He had swallowed the hook, and she saw it lodged deep in his gullet. And she thought, Joseph will be very happy. . . . "Nor are you very subtle," she concluded.

"Subtle enough!" he said, looking straight at her. She had given him a blueprint, and she was too egocentric not to assume that he must follow it. However, there was no such rule of thumb.

CHAPTER SIX

KAREL dozed fitfully in the corner of the front seat. Each time the old truck lurched on the rutted road leading mountainwards, his head jerked, and he became dimly conscious of where he was, of Kravat at the wheel, and of his own misgivings.

Kravat seemed to be enjoying the excursion. He was humming softly and viciously out of tune; he was steering with one hand and with the other tapping out on his knee the scanty rhythm of the melody he had in his mind.

"If you wreck the truck," Karel said sleepily, "you'll be in trouble. It's the Benda Works truck, and even if you're the head of the Works Council, you don't own it."

Kravat honked the horn and scared a few chickens which, seduced by the Sunday peace of the road, were pecking among the dried horse manure. They cackled and fluttered about, unable to decide which ditch offered them the better safety, and finally split up just in time to avoid disaster.

Karel came fully awake and said, "Everything about this is illegal. . . ."

"So you've told me," Kravat acknowledged.

Karel had told him at four in the morning when Kravat had roused him and shown him the truck downstairs and said, "By tonight, you'll be a real doctor again, with all the equipment you need, and more." From the moment they had left Rodnik pitched in darkness, Karel had been struggling against the rules of his upbringing — what was left of them after his life in camp.

The road became steeper, the farms fewer along the precipitous hillsides.

"That's why I like it!" said Kravat.

"What do you mean?"

"It reminds me of the other things we did together."

"It's still illegal," insisted Karel.

Kravat said, "When the Germans arrested me —"

"They arrested you? When did they arrest you?"

"In January of this year. . . . They took me to Prague and put me in Pankrac Prison, had me up for trial, and sentenced me to death. So there I was in the death cell, worrying whether I'd be shot, or have my head cut off, or be strung up by the neck. I liked the hanging end of it least."

"The hanging end of it —" repeated Karel.

The truck, laboring and steaming, had reached the top of the climb. The road sloped sharply downward, into a pine-studded valley through whose

center a small river meandered, blinking silvery wherever its water hit against one of the many smooth boulders in its course. In the distance, a series of stately buildings, some red-roofed, some green, appeared out of the woods.

"I sat and I sat," said Kravat, "until, on the fifth of May, the shooting began and the Revolution came and they blew open the doors of Pankrac. And then I found out why I hadn't been hung or shot or decapitated. You see, the Nazi Government had relieved the Reich Protector in Bohemia, Herr Frank, of his duties. But the new man couldn't come and take over because the Russians were at the gates of Berlin."

"That was lucky!" Karel said, because Kravat expected some comment.

Krvat shifted gears. "My death warrant was already on the Protector's desk — only there was no one in Prague entitled to sign it. . . . You see what comes of excessive legality."

"I get your point," Karel laughed.

Abruptly, the laugh died. He shivered. It was to him as if he were riding with a ghost: this vital, solid man at his left, by all human logic, should be dead. The idea was deeply shocking. Somehow, he had assumed that the tall melter who took over the group after the arrest of Professor Stanek and himself had survived the remaining period of the occupation without mishap. Assumed? He had never thought of it! He had been so consumed with his own experiences that the experiences of others hadn't mattered. Something in him had blanked a part of his mind so as to protect the thin scar tissue growing over the sore of the past. He must have recovered greatly, more than he had realized, if this could make itself apparent to him without his needing to beat his breast or to go into a tailspin.

"With me," he said lightly, "chopping the head off would have been worst."

"Tastes differ!" Kravat shrugged and drove across a small bridge and made the truck screech to a halt in front of a gingerbread two-story house on a side street beyond the town square.

The town was emptier, and more quiet and more deserted, than even a Sunday noon in a small spa out of season warranted. The larger buildings — the Grand Hotel, the Splendide, and the *Hotel Zur Post*, whose German sign had been incompletely painted out — were shuttered and their doors firmly locked. Only the Villa Rosa, from whose flagpole a faded Czech flag flapped in the breeze, showed signs of life. Some of its windows were open; over their sills were spread fat red or blue checkered featherbeds, or colorful peasant quilts; from balcony to balcony stout, broad-cheeked women were chatting, leaning over the balustrades. These were the wives of the Czech officers of this border garrison; their men lounged on the front stairs or read newspapers on the ground-floor veranda.

They seemed to have the town to themselves. The German owners of the large hotels had fled; the lesser Sudeten folk, the small shopkeepers and tradesmen, kept out of the way, hoping that by making themselves as invisible as possible, they would be overlooked and forgotten.

Kravat got out of the cab of the truck and looked about with the pride of anticipated ownership, a trait which Karel had noticed in him frequently in recent days. With a sweep of his long arms, whose thick wrists protruded from the sleeves of his worn jacket, Kravat said, "All this will belong to us. We will send the workers here, and the workers' wives and children, and we'll teach them to enjoy these things that they never had. We'll make this a trade-union resort — what do you say, Doctor?"

"And who's going to pay for it?"

"We are! Take us, for instance, at Benda. We make glass, we sell it — what are we going to do with the profits? Your brother Joseph doesn't get them any more — you don't get them — I don't get them! The union will rent a hotel from the Government, buy the food, hire the help — it's very simple."

"Now, Kravat, it isn't as simple as that!"

"But it is! You eliminate the private boss, and things reduce themselves automatically to their essentials. Work, and what you do with the results of your work, become a matter for you to decide. That's why it's simple."

Karel smiled quizzically. He liked Kravat's direct approach, but he doubted that life would ever function that way, even under the new conditions. Not that he wanted to be the one to disillusion Kravat. If Kravat, in his enthusiasm, had forgotten the jealousies of people, the petty ambitions, the eternal tendency to backslide, to beat your neighbor over the head instead of considering him as your brother, these things would make themselves felt soon enough, and quite forcefully.

A soldier, rifle slung over his shoulder, ambled up, placed his foot on the running board of the truck, and inquired casually what they wanted in town.

Kravat pulled a paper out of his pocket. Karel glanced at it as the soldier slowly deciphered it. It was a typewritten document made out by the District National Committee in Limberk, entitling the worker Frantisek Kravat and the physician Karel Benda of Rodnik to enter, for the purpose of taking inventory, house Number 367 in the spa of Singeruv Mlyn, premises formerly owned by one *Medicinae Universitatis* Dr. Reinhold Rust, who had left the country.

"Taking inventory?" the soldier asked hesitantly.

"Sure," said Kravat, lighting a cigarette and offering one to the soldier. "We've brought the truck along with us to expedite the matter. I guess

this Dr. Rust traveled light and the stuff he left behind is pretty heavy."

The soldier pocketed the cigarette carefully. "I guess you're right," he said, and, pointing his thumb in the direction of the frontier, added: "They traveled light. Bastards."

"Bastards," agreed Kravat.

"How will you get in?" asked the soldier. He was gazing toward the elaborately inlaid door. It seemed securely locked.

Kravat looked straight into the soldier's eyes and stated, "That's your problem. You've seen the letter from the Government. We've got to take inventory."

The soldier shoved his cap half over his forehead.

"Think, man — think!" Kravat encouraged him.

"There was a housekeeper —" the soldier mumbled finally. "She lives somewhere down the road."

"Well, go get her," said Kravat, "and hurry up! We're on Government business!"

The soldier trotted off.

"They're very helpful here." Kravat slapped Karel's back. "You'll be a real doctor yet!"

Karel, the slap having knocked the breath out of him, coughed. "You're taking advantage of him. He's a peasant from somewhere in the sticks, and he isn't quite clear about what inventory means. If I had known of this letter and what's in it, I'd never have come with you. You'll get the boy into trouble, and us, too."

"What good is an inventory if the things you find aren't put to use?"

"See the commanding officer at least, and get him to agree."

"Why should I? He'll only refer the matter back to the District National Committee, and it'll take us three months more to get at the stuff. Meanwhile, our people will be sick, and you won't be able to treat them because you're waiting for another piece of paper and a new set of stamps."

Kravat had him there. If Kravat's information was correct, this locked house contained everything for killing pain, cutting sores, mending limbs, delivering, and saving lives — except that none of it belonged to him or Kravat, even though it no longer belonged to Dr. Rust.

"Listen," Karel said in a last attempt to clear himself, "these hotels, the mountains here — you said you wanted this to be a health resort for the workers. So they'll need Rust's equipment right here. You're stealing from one set of workers to give to another. . . ."

This time he had Kravat.

"I wish you hadn't told me that," Kravat said. "You intellectuals, you trap a fellow like me. It's not fair. I want to do the right thing —"

The soldier, leading a frightened woman, was coming up the road. Kravat was folding and refolding the permit he had managed to get from the District National Committee.

Karel looked at the small wad of paper in Kravat's fingers. His mind was picturing the wonderful equipment this Dr. Rust must have owned to satisfy the rich merchants and prosperous officials who had flocked from Germany during the war to this quiet, secluded spa in the mountains — the X-ray machine, the fluoroscope, the compact little miracle that took your electrocardiogram, the microscopes, the pincers and scissors and syringes and needles and lamps and surgical tables . . .

The soldier, hurrying the woman, was almost upon them.

"Kravat!" Karel said, "it will take a long time before this workers' resort is organized. By then, we should be in a position to furnish them new equipment."

"You mean, first things come first?"

"Definitely."

Kravat sighed with relief and sat down on the running board.

Karel ordered the woman to open the door and strode into the abandoned house of Dr. Rust.

That God-damned Sudeten-German spa specialist!

Karel sweated and strained, getting the fugitive doctor's heavy equipment out of the office, down the stairs, and onto the truck. He shamelessly commandeered the soldier to aid Kravat and himself in dismantling, lugging, and moving — which also kept the man from going back to his post and talking to his sergeant or lieutenant about the strange inventory. No time was wasted on crating. Over the protest of the housekeeper, Kravat appropriated the Sudeten doctor's bedding and blankets and pillows, dumped some on the dirty floor of the truck, and used the rest to wrap up the booty. As a last thought, Karel dragged down Rust's medical library, more than a hundred books, and threw them on the back of the truck.

Finally, Kravat chained up the backdrop. Karel, knees shaking, face pasty with sweat and dust, surveyed the haul. It was rich beyond expectation and, in a country stripped bare by the Germans, of inestimable value. The drugs alone could be weighed only in lives. All of this loot meant lives.

It awed Karel. The heavy load flattening the worn-out springs of the truck began to rest even more heavily on his shoulders. What he had contracted for with the committee of the Benda Works Council was a few hours of routine checkups, nothing complicated; the difficult cases would be handed to the understaffed little hospital in Limberk. But with what he had there on the truck, and with half the country's doctors exterminated, with the universities shut down for years by the Germans and no new doc-

tors filling the gaps, he might as well forget the arrangement and meet his obligation. He'd have to become a twenty-four-hours-a-day doctor.

"Let's start!" he said tersely.

The soldier saluted. The truck rumbled off, away from the pleasantly peaceful little houses and the blind windows of the dead hotels.

Now that he had to accept the change in his life which the cargo on the lumbering vehicle brought about, Karel worried over his microscopes, his X-ray lamp, and the glass screen of his fluoroscope lying haphazardly on top of his ophthalmic chair. His qualms grew as he caught himself referring to them as *his*. He was only their administrator, as Joseph was the National Administrator of the Benda Works — and at that, Joseph had a damned sight better title to the Works than Karel had to this equipment.

He tried to relax by making a rough mental layout of where he would place the things. Some of them would have to be installed in a dispensary. Joseph would have to make room for that in the office wing of the Works; it would be another contribution to the antagonisms cropping up between them. Karel stroked back his matted hair. He determined to have a heart-to-heart talk with Joseph very soon. He would be self-sufficient, now, and that should make it easier for him to find a way to keep business apart from family, and to reassert the genuine affection he had for the big, bluff, disappointed peasant that was Joseph.

Perhaps it would ease matters if he kept the dispensary modest and took more of the equipment into the dingy flat Kravat had supplied for him. That meant that he could keep for himself only the kitchen and one small room and a windowless cell where the bed might fit. Well, he had no great desire for personal luxuries, and the monkish existence forced on him by this sudden *embarras de richesses* would be some sort of penance for the thrill of the raid. Penance! He'd do penance all right — the only doctor in Rodnik, the only doctor within miles! It was ridiculous to feel guilty about any part of the escapade. The raid had been socially necessary.

"Kravat!" he called so suddenly that the melter sat up. "Why is everything that simple to you?"

Kravat kept his eyes on the road. "I come from a long line of simple people. My grandfather, who etched some very fine goblets for that crook, the old Emperor, once told me: Franta, my boy, there are only two kinds of men — those who work, and those who work them. . . . Once you get on to that, Karel, everything else falls into place." He cut the philosophy short. "I've arranged with some of the men to help us get this load under your roof. I want it done fast, because we're going to be busy tonight. There's a meeting."

There were always meetings, Karel thought. The men went in for meetings with profligacy; the very fact that they could get together openly

and raise their voices over a tall glass of thin beer was an inducement.

"I'd like you to attend," Kravat said.

"Me?" frowned Karel. "I've got all those books to read. What kind of meeting is it?"

"Just you and myself and a couple of other men, and Professor Stanek."

"Stanek —" said Karel.

"He's been waiting to see you, I told you that. You should have made the effort to visit him. After all, he's not young, and the Nazis weren't kind to him, and it wasn't his doing that they arrested you —"

"That's not why I kept away from him!" Karel broke in. "I've kept away from all of you, and don't make me feel sorry that —"

"That you came to me? . . . We don't force anyone to do anything."

"Tell me, Kravat — are you trying to bait me with that stuff in the rear of the truck? Because if that's what you intend, you might as well cart it back, right now!"

Kravat's face tightened. "I thought I'd made it clear to you that we need a doctor in Rodnik!"

He drove on, wordlessly. When they came into Rodnik, he picked up two workers who were waiting for him, and together the three unloaded the equipment and carried it into Karel's flat. Karel directed the unloading. Kravat kept whatever was said between them to the task at hand.

The next hours Karel spent in the jumble of his new acquisitions. He pretended to create some order, but was distracted again and again by the dials of the machines, the wires, the shining gadgets. He pricked his finger and smeared a drop of his blood on a slide and looked through the microscope at his corpuscles; he grouped his surgical knives and scissors and pincers on the glass shelves and in the smoothly sliding, narrow drawers of the white steel cabinet; he tried to set up the fluoroscope, but its weight was too much for him; he leafed through some of Dr. Rust's German volumes, cut many uncut pages, started to read — hateful language, echo of barking Buchenwald guards — and was too restless to settle down to any serious study of the ponderous texts.

In the end, exhausted, he sat down in the big leather easy chair with its yellowed doilies. The room was silent. Rodnik was silent. He did not bother to turn on the electric switch; the still gray around him soothed him. He thought he could sit this way eternally, but after a time the quiet irked him. He wanted to hear voices, laughter, or even the subdued steps of someone moving in the adjoining room. He began to feel as alone as he had felt during the nights in solitary after his arrest by the Germans. He could not return to Kitty and Thomas, not so soon. He played with the idea of a visit to Joseph's house, but he wouldn't be able to talk to him; Elinor Simpson

would be there. What could he tell her of the newest development in Czech medical science — that it was strongly tinged with piracy?

He went to the cupboard and cut a few slices of bread and unwrapped a smallish lump of cheese and took a shriveled apple from the top shelf. He ate mechanically. Darkness was all around him. He returned to his chair.

He could go to this meeting at Stanek's house; at least it would stop him from listening to his thoughts pounding against his skull. He'd like to see Stanek now, but Stanek surrounded by people was another matter. And he knew they wanted something of him. They probably wouldn't come out with it. They'd probably act very busy and serious and disciplined, making him feel bad about not being a part of it, and aping the underground days — though the enemy was long gone from the country, leaving only the scars.

The scars . . . Out of the darkness crept the memories, the jagged pictures of wounds and broken eyes and pus and slobbering lips and the endless rows of bodies. His head ached, his temples began to hammer. He pressed his fists against them and scoffed at the memories. What a smart trick of his, to pull out the old dreams to keep himself from dreaming better ones!

Yes, he would go to Stanek. He got up and switched on the light. He looked at himself in the mirror, the gaunt face, the gray, straggly hair, the bloodless lips. He coughed, and the sound of it comforted him. Aloud, he said, "Dr. Benda! The hell with the thin skin over the sore of your past!" He brushed the crumbs off his shirt and pants, put on the old American battle jacket, and locked his flat.

Kravat opened the door.

"I see you changed your mind," he said.

"Yes," said Karel. "I did."

The men sat around an old-fashioned table covered by a maroon-colored cloth. A green-shaded lamp hung suspended over the table, casting a mild, even light over their heads.

The Professor had aged. He seemed to have shrunk. He was dressed exactly as Karel remembered him, as if he'd never worn the stripes of the concentration camp. His thin black tie, frazzled at the sides, was knotted around a stiffly starched collar; his pince-nez perched loosely on the permanently inflamed saddle of his nose; a ribbon, dangling down to his vest, kept his glasses from falling to the floor when the quick movements of his head made them slip off.

Karel marveled at him. His trained eyes easily discovered the devastation wrought on the Professor's body — but the body was making a comeback and was kept going by the man's will power and a tremendous energy.

Stanek's voice, sometimes breaking, sometimes rising, was the only indication of his effort to remain controlled.

The faces of the other men around the table, even Kravat's, receded into a dim background. There was no doubt in Karel's mind that Stanek was the leading spirit here, as he had been in the days of the underground, even though he still, in giving his opinions, added a *Don't you think so, too?* or, *Don't you agree?*

Neither Stanek nor any of the other men present had paid much attention to Karel's entry. They had greeted him casually, as one greets someone who was expected and who has been seen frequently on similar occasions. They finished the point they were debating, something about the need for regular courses in basic economy.

Only then Stanek rose, "My dear Karel, let me look at you. I'm very happy to see you alive and well and fit. Welcome — " He appeared to be moved. "Welcome back."

Karel took the dry old hand. "I'm sorry I didn't get to see you sooner. I know I should have — "

Stanek picked up a small package that had been lying before him on the table, and presented it to Karel. "We want you to have this," he said simply.

The men watched Karel eagerly as he broke the string and tore off the wrapping and opened the book and read the dedication page that held all their signatures under the line: *To Our Friend*.

"Well?" said Kravat.

"Oh, let him be!" said another. "You always want a speech. We gave it to him for keeping his mouth shut, not for making speeches."

"Thank you, all of you," said Karel. "I'll treasure this."

There was a pause.

Then Kravat said, "*The Origin of the Family* should be less treasured than read." It broke the mood.

Stanek said warmly, "I've never had the opportunity, Karel, of telling you some of the things I've felt. Believe me, I've often thought of whether I did the right thing that night, bringing the wounded man to you and exposing you to what happened. Not so much," he said after a moment, "because of your personal fate, as because your arrest meant a grave loss to the group as it was then constituted. My only excuse is that I thought no one had seen me lead the man to your door. I was wrong in this, it turned out."

"That's all so long ago," said Karel.

"But we must be clear about it," replied Stanek. The stiff cuffs of his shirt, as they had done before the war, had slipped out of the sleeves of his jacket; and he tapped them back impatiently. "If you still resent us, and you are entitled to that, please say so."

"I could have shut my door in your face!"

"No," said Stanek, "that's no answer. You were in our group and you had to follow orders — besides, as a doctor, you would not have turned away a patient."

The grinder Otakar Blaha, who was one of the men at the table, shoved his head forward to see Karel better. Karel was conscious of the connection between Stanek's remark and the fact that Kravat had called on him when Lida had wanted to fire Blaha. He thought: It's the same pattern. . . . They were again involving him through his profession.

"What's your answer?" asked Stanek.

"You might give me some credit," said Karel. "I knew the possible consequences of my decisions. I knew them when I joined you and I knew them when I removed the bullet from the patient. . . ."

Karel became uncomfortable. He was talking in a manner that would make these men accept and trust him. Did he really want that? With all he had done and learned — during his university years, in the underground period, in concentration camp, from Novak, from all sorts of people — where did he really stand, where did he want to go from here?

Stanek had sat down again, but was still glancing at him over the rim of his pince-nez. "Well," he said, "we must get on. There's an empty chair. Please, take it."

Karel gripped the back of the chair. The truth was that he had evaded a full answer to Stanek's question; he was unfair to the old man, to all of them. "Just why did you want me to come here, tonight?" he demanded.

Stanek smiled at the undertone of aggressiveness. "We want your help, and we think you can help us because, as our doctor, you're again part of the life of this town. And also we wanted to give you the book."

They *were* telling him, and quite openly. He admired Stanek's frankness, all the more so since he had anticipated shilly-shallying. The Professor's ethics evidently had stood the trial of the past even better than had the rest of him. Karel couldn't bring himself to ask: What kind of help do you want me to give?

"Don't you want to sit down, Karel, and join our discussion? You'll see soon enough exactly how you can help us."

Karel obeyed.

"We have to talk about the elections that are coming up this spring. The people will have to elect a Constitutional National Assembly, and it will be the first real test of political strength."

Winter hadn't come yet; the Professor was working far ahead, thought Karel. He could see the reason. The present Provisional Assembly meant nothing, it had been hastily convoked, and its composition was arbitrarily fixed by something called the Koshice Agreement which a couple of dozen politicians returning from exile had cooked up.

"So the campaign will be bitter and hard," Stanek's words quickened, "bitter and hard, for every one of us. And not just because we're playing with the number of seats this or that party is going to get. That's important, but only for what you do with your seats — don't you think so? The fight will be over nationalization, and over socialism, though of course all the parties will claim they favor both, to some degree."

"You people will be rowing with the tide, for a change," said Karel. Nobody reacted. Blaha was staring at his crippled hands; Kravat was supporting his chin on his thumbs, and it was impossible to say whether he had been listening to the whole thing with rapt attention or not at all; the three other workers were thoughtful.

"Socialism . . ." Stanek almost fondled the word. "Our National Front Government, which grew out of Koshice, has taken some measures in the direction of it. Some measures" — his voice became pitched — "which will be nullified if we don't show that the people are behind us and want us to push further."

Always further, frowned Karel, always pushing. And yet they were acting logically.

Stanek had bridled himself and was continuing in an even but somehow loaded tone. "We've had a revolution in May, but none of its gains are secured. There's a smoothness about today's political surface, but it's only a surface; underneath are forces at work to take us back to the days of the First Republic, to the exploitation we knew, to mass unemployment, and to the kind of national weakness that led to Munich. That's how it is, don't you agree?"

Karel could see that the men were agreeing. He guessed that they had heard similar talks before and that Stanek was trying to convince him. Well, he was convinced. And what now?

"Practically speaking," said Kravat, "any proposals?"

"We are to suggest a candidate from here," Stanek informed them. "If approved, he'll be on the district list of the Party; I don't know how high up on the list he'll be, or whether he'll be elected — that depends on the number of votes we can get. But if we have a local name on the list, it will increase our chances in Rodnik and the surrounding towns and countryside."

For an instant, the idea flashed through Karel's mind that they had called him to this meeting because they were going to nominate him. But that was nonsense; he wasn't even a member of their Party; he'd been out of everything. . . . And he wouldn't accept if they proposed it. He was no politician, he just wanted to work, look at people's throats, listen to their heartbeats.

"I've been thinking of Franta Kravat," said Stanek. "He's a worker, and

a good one. He's known among the workers, not only at Benda, but in the refineries, too, and in other towns nearby. He's been with us for a long time, he was a leader in the underground period, the Nazis sentenced him to death — what do you men feel about it?"

Kravat still sat as he had been sitting, chin on his thumbs. The others were turning toward him. He looked up and said, "I don't know. . . ."

Blaha spoke up. "I've known Franta Kravat all these years. He's good in many things. He knows what the people want because he listens to them and has his ear to the ground. But he's too impetuous."

"That can be corrected," said Stanek. "Don't you think so?"

"Yes — in time," said Blaha. "But not in time for this campaign. Our candidate — that's like the man who carries our banner. He can't march too far ahead of the others." He blinked nearsightedly and sat back, having had his say.

Meek little Blaha! thought Karel. If he has a crust of bread to eat and potatoes for his kids, it's thanks to Kravat. And here he goes spoiling Kravat's chances.

But Kravat seemed to accept the censure. He said heavily, "Blaha is right. I've been undisciplined, sometimes. I like to do things on my own hook. And the worst is," he confessed, "I enjoy it!"

Karel smiled, but the others let the quip pass. Stanek asked, "Well, who else is there? The Party wants an answer, and we can't submit our private little jokes!"

"I propose you," said Kravat.

"I'm a funny old man!" said Stanek in his high-pitched tone. "I'm ill! I've got a school to take care of, which I'm just starting to reorganize! I'll probably die before the campaign is over —"

"In that case," Kravat said coolly, "the next man on the list moves up to your place."

"You weren't funny when the Nazis were in Rodnik," said one of the men.

"We can find schoolteachers," argued Blaha. "It is more difficult to find leaders."

"Will you accept if we make it unanimous?" asked Kravat, his hand now flat on the table, determination on his long, horsy face.

Stanek rubbed the inflamed saddle of his nose. "Yes," he said, "it looks like the only thing to do —" and abruptly, addressing Karel: "You can help us greatly if you give us your support. Will you?"

So that was it! The bluntness embarrassed Karel.

"Not for my sake," Stanek went on as if he knew that Karel needed time to think, "not as a personal favor. As far as I'm concerned, I hope that up at the district organization they'll get such a choice of excellent candidate

material that they can forget about me. But for the sake of the things we fought for, and so that the men that you and I saw die shouldn't have died for nothing."

He had spoken quietly. The appeal of his words went deep; yet they also stirred up in Karel's mind questions of a quite different order — was this why Kravat had roped him into accepting the position as Works Doctor? Was this why he had been given the most lavish equipment, which he could never have afforded otherwise? Was this why he had been maneuvered into opposition to his own brother and to Lida? Was it all a plot they had laid out long ago and to which they were now putting the finishing touches?

"The doctor in a town like ours is an influential person," Stanek was saying. "You may not realize it, but you have many friends among the people, from before the war. And the name of Benda has weight, around here."

"He can do us a lot of good among the middle class," Kravat added his own analysis. "The butcher and the candy store owner and the sexton of the church are more likely to listen to a Dr. Benda than to me."

They considered him a means to an end. Perhaps their end was good. It was good that he had a fluoroscope, but the means by which it had been provided were not. They didn't seem aware of the contradiction. They expected him to see that his help was necessary, so as to make sure that the Benda Works remained property of the people, so as to take a hotel in the mountains and send the workers there, so as to guarantee that there was a doctor twice a week in the dispensary of the Benda Works, and so on. They expected him to see all that and to act accordingly, regardless of his personal attachments, his limitations. And they had a right to expect it because he had been with them in the underground, and had treated the wounded man, and had stood up under the torture in the Gestapo prison and had revealed nothing. But those had been different times, and everything had been clear and unmistakable.

"Will you help us?" said Stanek.

The black ribbon dangling down from the pince-nez held an absurd fascination for Karel's eyes. "Yes, I'll support you," he said, "in my way."

"In your way" — Kravat's face came up — "and what does that mean?"

"I haven't started being a doctor yet. I'll have my hands full. How can I tell you?"

Stanek waved off Kravat. And pushing back his cuffs, "I understand, Karel. I know what you've been through. You're entitled to —"

"It's not that I'm afraid!" Karel cut him off. "At least I hope not!" He felt the small beads of perspiration on his upper lip. "I've proved that I'm not afraid. I've seen death and sliced it in a hundred different ways, dead hearts and dead stomachs and dead livers and dead brains and dead eyes. . . ."

They were sitting, now, like statues in the mild light of the green lamp. Karel wiped his lip. "Maybe I'm not yet equal to marching as fast as you!" he burst out. "Maybe I'm not equal to marching at all."

The pince-nez glittered. "Well, think it over," said Stanek. "I daresay there'll be lots of drums."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Had any voice prophesied: Within the year after the war for liberation, you shall have to re-examine the principles for which you fought — it would have been drowned in derision. Yet today, man's thought concerns itself once more with his freedom to speak and to act within the framework of civilized living alongside his fellow man. The liberal tenets accepted as absolute truths have become subject to doubt; truth itself and the search for it have been thrown on the scale of relativity. What has happened to the centuries-old postulate of our Master Jan Hus, the first moulder of the philosophy of the Czech people, who preached: "Love each other, never let the righteous be oppressed, and grant everyone free access to the truth"?

FROM THOMAS BENDA: ESSAY ON FREEDOM

ONCE started, the work grew on Thomas. His first need was to clear his own mind so as to enable himself to see the many aspects of the problem. It was like clearing wild land. Catch phrases and terms commonly used but rarely more than half understood were like stubborn roots and deeply imbedded rocks which had to be dug up and dragged aside before the plow could turn a clod.

And the plow had to cut deep because the surface was overgrown with weeds, colorful but useless. On no subject had so many brittle generalities been uttered as on this one. *Freedom* the word itself, immediately conjured up a great variety of noble and heroic slogans, most of them meaningless. And when he studied some of the people who had coined the slogans, and investigated their motives and their story, the result was amazing and often embarrassing. He was both angered and amused by the discovery that so many advocates of the idea, while employing the word in its widest sense, meant only their own freedom, but never the other fellow's.

It was necessary to find definitions, to ask the simple questions before progressing to the more complicated ones. What was it to be free? When were you free? How many different kinds of freedom existed?

Suppose a man wanted to go from Rodnik to Prague. He was obviously free to do so; no policeman, no Nazi guard stopped him now. But there was the railroad fare. If you had it, you were free. If not, you weren't. So, lacking the cash, you were free theoretically, but practically you were not. . . .

Though this seemed like primer stuff, it was unavoidable, and its perspective was surprising. How many such barriers existed! The plate glass of the shop window that kept you from taking the candy; the law that prevented you from doing a dozen things it might be pleasant to do; your own inhibitions that held you back from living as fully and recklessly and freely as you might wish. . . .

We were not free because we were not alone. The absolute individual, perfectly free, could exist only outside the life of others, outside of society — a Robinson Crusoe.

None of us were Crusoes. We were all subject to a number of restrictions; which meant that freedom was no more than a commonly agreed upon point on a scale, like the fever point on the thermometer — below it, with only so many restrictions, you were free; above it, the restrictions becoming oppressive, you were not.

But where was this point? And was not this point an entirely different one in different individuals, different classes, different nations, different periods of history?

And if mankind was driven forward by the Promethean element in us, by the creative rebelliousness against the rut of established conventions and laws and forms — what were the viewpoints and considerations under which Prometheus could, or must, be chained? And who was entitled to sit in judgment over him?

Thomas started in his chair. There it was again, the soft knock at the door. His thoughts, so carefully coaxed along and arranged, were jumbled in a hot wave of anger — didn't she have any appreciation of what it meant to create? Did she think he was like a peasant who could say Whoa to the horse and halt his manure cart, or like a worker who could switch his machine on and off?

The apologetic knock sounded a third time. He shoved back the sheets on his work table and, with a few steps, was at the door.

"What *is* it, Kitty! The house on fire? What *do* you want? Money? Why didn't you tell me at breakfast?"

"Joseph is calling."

"Well, so what! Since when is he so important that you have to disrupt my work?"

She held her answer for a moment. Then she said placatingly, "I asked

him to leave a message, or to phone back, but he insisted. He made it so urgent that I thought — ”

“*You* thought!” His lips curled downward.

“All right! I’ll tell him you don’t want to talk with him.”

“That I can tell him myself.” He brushed by her and went to the telephone in the hall and gave his brother a cheerless, “Hello!”

He was answered by a battery of words so quick, so jubilant, that they were hard to keep apart and follow. Thomas clamped the receiver between his shoulder and his ear, lit a cigarette, and stood, his face immobile. Only occasionally did he offer a *Yes, yes*. With a last, reluctant *Yes* that sounded like a concession made under duress, he hung up.

He looked around for Kitty, but she was gone. His annoyance mounting, he listened for a sound from her; there was none. She was neither in the kitchen nor the dining room. He found her finally in the living room, sewing.

She put her work aside. “Was it important?”

“Of course not!” he said accusingly. “Just that our Sunday evening is gone.”

She had not particularly looked forward to this Sunday evening, or to any other evening. And even though his tone showed that he expected her to be distressed, she couldn’t feel anything about it. She picked up the socks she was darning.

“He wants us for dinner, a big dinner — an affair of state, he calls it. The family, and all the prominent people of Rodnik. and some from Prague and from Limberk, and I’m his *pièce de résistance*, I presume.”

Karel would be there, she thought, and suppressed the thought immediately.

“Well,” he said, “you’ll have a chance to dress up. Aren’t you thrilled? Joseph is. He said I was the first to get the news. They enlarged his little empire and made him National Administrator of the Hammer Works, too. I can just see him spread himself over us and over the whole glass industry, like a bloated frog.”

“You don’t hate him that much,” she said appeasingly. “Suppose you had a new book coming out — how would you feel? I’m very glad for him.”

“Oh, Christ . . .”

She heard him bang shut the door to his study.

Kitty continued to sew. A lot of mending had to be done; things were wearing out, and it became difficult to replace them — there wasn’t much to be had in the stores, and her budget had become desperately small. If she went out and found a job. . . . Karel might help her to get back into nursing. But her job was cut out for her; Thomas, alone for eight hours a day,

would get caught on so many rough edges that the other two thirds of the day would be impossible.

He was getting harder and harder to handle, and his temper was growing more and more uncertain. She wondered if she was losing her touch. She understood him, every slightest vagary, but sometimes it was as if her senses were out of tune with his; this was new. She hadn't shared his anger at the interruption. She *could* warm to Joseph's success; it would be some balm for the nationalization of the Benda Works. She *did* like the idea of the dinner. . . . Besides, it brought some change into her routine, and it might help to draw Joseph and Thomas a shade closer, and she knew that her life had been better when the two had been friends. .

"Kitty!"

He was back, and frowning at the pile of socks next to her chair.

"I don't know what it is. . . ." His truculence was gone. "I beg of you, you must keep these extraneous things from me. And you mustn't fight me."

"I'm not fighting you, Thomas." She smiled at him.

Her smile somehow calmed him. It highlighted the green tones in the hazel of her eyes. "Everything was clear this morning," he said plaintively, "and now my thoughts are fuzzy and all I've got in my head is a mess of choppy, disconnected impressions. Do you want me to stop working altogether?"

"I've been waiting a long time for you to start working again on something you think is worth while."

"This *is* worth while," he said. "I have a feeling I'm on the track of a very big thing."

She no longer was smiling. Her face was intent.

"It's going to put me back where I belong, Kitty. It's going to be a book, more important than the novel I gave up, much deeper, of far wider scope. . . ."

She took his hands and laid her forehead against them. "Everything is going to be better, now."

The emotion behind her words surprised him. Gently, he freed his hands. "I'm writing on Freedom — an essay. It has to be organized, of course, in my mind and on paper. But of this I'm sure: If I'm given half a chance, I can do it. And I don't know how many men there are in this country, or in the world for that matter, who could do it."

The world . . . That was the Elinor Simpson touch. "Does Elinor know of it?"

He drew back. "She doesn't. Nobody does. I told you only because — I could have told you sooner, perhaps —"

"I wish you had. It means so much to me —" She looked up at him, her eyes bright. "To us."

"But you have no idea of how I'm handling it!"

"Oh, I know it'll be a great book. I know you. I remember when you started on your first book, I remember it, exactly, and how it grew, and how beautiful everything was —"

"You're very ambitious for me."

She became wary. He didn't seem to resent her enthusiasm, but she must measure the dose. "You're working again," she said, "that's the main thing. You're getting your teeth into a book."

"Why does it mean that much to you?"

"I'm your wife!"

"You never got much reflected glory. Do you want that?" A slight, puzzled frown showed around his eyes.

"Lord, no!" How could she express herself without irritating him and confusing matters? "When you write something big and important, Thomas, I feel that our life has a purpose—your life and mine—"

"And if I didn't write an important book, there would be no purpose to our life?"

"Please, don't twist my words." Her lips trembled.

He sighed. "I'm pretty difficult, am I not?"

"Sometimes."

"I don't intend to be, Kitty. It just happens."

There had been a time when she would have known exactly what to do and what to say at his moments of gentleness. Now, she was afraid her knack was failing her.

"Tell me more about the Essay," she said.

"It's—it's very complicated." He sensed she was using the subject to evade him. "When I've part of the draft completed, I'll let you type it. Let's stop talking literature."

"What do you want to talk about?"

"You and me, for instance."

"Why? What's wrong?"

"Does there have to be something wrong?" He stared at her. Her breasts were round and firm, her lips full and soft, and she was miles away. "That's the trouble with people. They look at their relationship to one another only when it has started to fall apart."

Kitty felt the pit of her stomach constrict.

"I'm different," he went on. "I look at us, the two of us, in our house. We should be happier, now. You can't have a stranger in the house for long, even your own brother."

Karel. . . Her needle went faster. Not a thing of his was left in the house, and he had kept away.

"I see your care and your love and devotion—I'm not insensitive—"

He hesitated. It was the light. It gave her throat a suppleness and put shadows under her eyes. "But I lock myself in my study. I have to — don't you see?"

"Don't apologize, Thomas."

"The other day, in the middle of writing, I thought of you. You've got time on your hands. There's not much satisfaction in this housework" — he picked up a rolled-up pair of socks — "or in making things do. If we had children, perhaps —"

He stopped.

The years rushed in on her, the nights she had lain at his side. *We have no home*, he had always said. *Put another victim into this world?* he had asked. But these had been excuses. A child would have tied him down and clipped his wings.

"Kitty, do you want to have a child?"

She got up and took the socks away from him and stroked a strand of his hair off his forehead.

"Do you, Kitty?"

He moved toward her as if he wanted to take her into his arms.

"After you've finished the book," she said, her voice small. "Now, a child would be like a stranger in the house and disturb you."

"You're too concerned about the book."

"I'm concerned about you."

"Yes," he said, "that's true." He turned.

At the door she caught up with him. "Forgive me, Thomas —" She was close to tears. "I'm in a vile mood."

"Mood —" He shrugged. "You never had moods. That was a great help to me. I guess it's my fault."

Her mind swirled with words, all of them wrong.

"Well, I told you I was sorry!" He clapped his hands in exasperation. "What more do you want of a man?"

He walked out.

Kitty went back into the room. She tried her sewing and dropped it again. She wished she could go after him into his study, and show him that she loved him, caress his lids and his temples, and smooth away the petulance of his mouth. She didn't know whether it was the right thing to do. And she had been told never to enter his study, not for anything.

It was late afternoon when Karel arrived at Joseph's house — the house in which he was born and spent his childhood and adolescent years. The Bendas were tradition-bound: the oldest inherited the family home. Karel didn't begrudge Joseph the double-winged mausoleum; but he did mind

Lida's taste, which now was stamped on every room and distorted the images of his youth.

The large sliding door between the salon and the game room was pushed back into the wall. The over-all effect was that of a good-sized funeral parlor paneled dark at one end and wallpapered chartreuse at the other. The dull spread of the rooms was enlivened somewhat by the crowd of guests who stood in groups or circulated, holding their plates of canapés and balancing their drinks.

Karel recognized many of them. They were the people who, in one way or another, shaped the making of glass in and around Rodnik and Martinice and who, along with it, might shape Joseph's fortunes. They were a cross section of this changing society — local dignitaries who had outlasted the war and who were at ease in their dark, shiny-seated suits; those who wore their new clothes as if they didn't trust their seams; and those who had come up so recently that they had not yet acquired the wardrobe for the occasion. The women chatted circumspectly, careful of years-old and freshly arisen sensitivities. There were the head bookkeepers and the foremen of the various departments of the Benda Works and of Vesely's. A four-man delegation from the District National Committee in Limberk, representing each of the four major political parties, was being greeted by Lida as Karel moved into the room.

"You're doing fine!" Karel told her after she had deposited the Limberk delegates at the refreshment table. "Looks like a very successful affair!"

She smiled at him busily, and he noticed something strange in her smile. It bothered him. His tongue ran over his new dentures. Of course! The silver cap on her tooth had been replaced by porcelain, and it did make her smile prettier. She moved with a poise that came from affluence and self-assurance and which was supported by her simple but rich dress.

"Very successful!" she said. "We'll have dinner as soon as Joseph and Mr. Kravat and Ministerial Councilor Novak return from Martinice —"

"Jan Novak?" Karel's heart began to act up, and he stood very still, trying to brake it.

Her bracelet jingled as she lightly tapped her left arm. "Jan Novak, yes. I almost forgot that you know him."

"Casually," he said, and was surprised at himself. What was he trying to hide?

Her eyes were leveled at him. "That's not what *he* says. Should I have prepared you for his coming?"

"Oh, no!" he shrugged, his heart again under control. "When I was in Prague about my teeth, I heard somewhere that he was working in a Ministry."

Lida considered asking him whether he had been to see Novak, but de-

cided against it. All she wanted to know she would find out in the course of the evening. "The men went to Martinice to have a look at the Hammer Works." She once more gave him her hostess smile. "Go over and speak to Elinor, will you? So few people here who can talk English . . ."

She swept off to continue mixing her guests. She was good at it, too. They began to thaw out; the conversation quickened and grew in volume.

"Uncle Karel!"

He took Petra into his arms and then stepped back and looked at her. "How lovely!" he said. "You've changed your hairdo?"

Petra blushed with pleasure. She had brushed her hair until her arms ached and until it fell softly to the back of her neck and curled into something like a chignon. Her eyes shone. "The dress is new, too," she pointed out. "It was made here in Rodnik, but the seamstress followed a picture I cut out of a Paris magazine."

Her dress softened some of her gawkinsness; her white collar of handmade lace was pinned together with a gold brooch which had belonged to her grandmother Anna.

"You're the best-looking girl here," Karel said, "bar none! Come on, we'll go visit."

You couldn't miss Elinor, particularly not today, with that fuchsia-colored Paris scarf tied smartly at her neck and setting off her silver-gray hair and the healthy tan of her face.

"Ah, the Doctor!" she welcomed. "It's a historic day for your brother Joseph. How do you feel about it?"

"Will I be quoted?"

"Nonsense! Do you see a notebook? I came out from Prague just to help Joseph celebrate. They can't keep a good man down, socialism or no. Right?"

"I suppose not."

She patted Petra affectionately, but kept Karel in focus. "Lovely child he has! Have you always been so averse to committing yourself, or only since you started to work for the Government?"

"Always," said Karel. "Picked up the habit in camp."

"Well, hang on to it!" Her hand left Petra's shoulder and swept over the room and the guests. "Unless you people do something to change the trend, this whole country will be just one large glorified concentration camp!"

"You're going to report that to America?"

"Naturally! We have a free press! We have —"

He was no longer listening. He had seen Kitty at the chartreuse end of the room. Their eyes met and held for the fraction of a second; then she averted hers and turned to Thomas. By this time, Elinor had discovered

Thomas and, like a snowplow opening the road for the cars behind it, went straight toward him, followed by Karel and Petra.

"Thomas, darling!" she said, "you look magnificent! You've got color in your cheeks, and a light in your eyes!" In an aside, she gave Kitty a "How are you?" and returned immediately to Thomas. "I bet I know what gives you that sparkle. You're working. You've started the Essay on Freedom!"

Thomas swallowed a sip of his drink and gagged and coughed.

"Don't deny it!" Elinor laughed noisily. "It's grand! It's tremendous! It's the best news I've had since Hiroshima."

Kitty was pale and constrained. Her gaze was riveted to the knot of Thomas's tie. Karel, aware of her every humor, was a little puzzled. Even if the comparison to an atomic explosion was some kind of Simpsonism, Thomas's decision to abandon the hopeless novel and to begin another serious work should be a source of joy to her. An essay on freedom, Elinor had said. Freedom, he thought. The gates of camp blown open. Novak leading him and a whole group of others to meet the Americans. And how would Thomas tackle the problem?

Thomas had gotten over his coughing spell. "I am working on something," he said crisply. "I'm trying to do the draft of an outline. And I'm doing some research. Kitty can tell you."

"His work is going well," Kitty stated, with effort.

Her face, as it now turned to Karel, was bare of emotion; and yet he was filled with the need to step in front of her and screen her from everyone's view. He heard Elinor demand, "I want to see everything you do, Thomas!" He heard Thomas's weak, evasive, "I'm afraid there's nothing to show!" and Kitty's polite, but too loud, "How are you doing in your new flat, Karel?"

"Fine, fine," he said. "I'm all set up."

"Did you get a charwoman to come in regularly?"

And then again Elinor's dominating voice, "You know how much I love to see your work develop, Thomas darling — and I have a sort of parental interest in the Essay!"

The wires of tension emerged suddenly like the strings of muscles under the uplifted skin of a cadaver — from Kitty to Thomas to Elinor — and the question burrowed into Karel's mind: What's Thomas preparing to write? A Czech edition of Simpsonian platitudes?

Thomas was talking to him, no longer concealing his atrocious mood. "What's the matter with you and Kitty? Are you trying to make it a formal afternoon?"

Silently, Kitty pleaded with Karel for help. He felt the wires of tension converge on him.

At this moment, Petra's hand, hot and moist, slipped into his. Her eyes were swiveling between him and Kitty. He bent down to her and said, "Petra, will you be my girl for today? Will you do me the honor of sitting next to me at dinner?" But the child's hand didn't relax its pressure. "If you ladies will excuse us," he bowed slightly, including Petra in his request, "I have some serious business with Thomas." And taking Thomas aside, "I need a drink. And so do you. Several, in fact. Let's go over there. Let's drink to your essay." He grasped Thomas's elbow and propelled him to the table where the bottles were set up.

"Someday I'm going to kick that Simpson hitch in the teeth!" said Thomas.

"Forget it!"

Karel shoved a double whisky at Thomas. Thomas gulped it down.

"Give me another!"

There was a fresh commotion at the door. Joseph had arrived. The dignitaries pressed forward to greet and congratulate him.

"I don't have to look at that, do I?" Thomas slammed down his glass and went to the opposite end of the room. Karel jovially toasted Joseph over the heads of the others and then, without drinking, lowered his arm. He had seen Novak, and Novak had seen him.

Lida had rushed to the door, all smiles, all welcome. The dignitaries, eager to pay their respects to the great man from Prague, lined up behind her. Karel watched Novak's progress along the route to the refreshment table; Novak was so sure of himself, so polished, as if he'd been a Government official all his life and never had lain on that bunk in the barracks, writhing in the climax of animal pain, his arm smashed to pulp, his eyes burning, his right hand clawing his mouth at each cut of the scalpel. Karel tried to take his eyes off the empty left sleeve. The old days were gone, the old ties were broken—or was he afraid that at a touch of Novak's only hand they might be resurrected?

The hand now was stretched out to him and he had to take it. "Karel Benda," said Novak, and again, with a warmth that dissolved Karel's apprehensions, "Karel Benda."

"I'm all right," said Karel. "And you?"

The keel was even once more. Novak laughed. "Perfect. A little over-worked. Even on Sundays I inspect factories. . . . You've got a good man, there, in your brother Joseph. He knows his glass."

"He knows his glass; yes, certainly . . ." Karel stopped. Was Novak qualifying his opinion of Joseph? "Drink?"

"No, thanks." Novak went on easily: "Your brother told me everything—the headaches he would have in getting the Hammer Works going, the raw materials he would need, the capital. He took me everywhere—the

generator, the grinding room, the mixing shed, the storage bins, the furnace halls. He even made me stick my head into an annealing kiln and under a furnace. Looks like a giant waffle down there. That's where the gas is piped in and distributed, isn't it?"

"Yes," nodded Karel, "that's where the gas goes in." Novak had sounded too glib, and Novak wasn't the man to accept anyone on his own say-so; yet, Joseph could be an excellent salesman, and he must have pulled all the stops to sell himself. Should I say something? thought Karel.

"Councilor!" Lida called. "Dinner is served."

She came over to them, Joseph at her side. They made a handsome host and hostess, Karel had to admit. They had an almost patrician air, although Joseph was now a patrician by appointment of the Government.

Lida offered Novak her arm. "Shall we . . . ?" and led the way into the dining room. The long table was covered with fine damask linen; the ornate silver shone; the crystal goblets reflected and broke the light into thousands of prisms.

The family, the delegation from Limberk, Novak, and Elinor Simpson were seated near the head of the table; the local officials and Kravat and the other bourgeois-for-a-day workers and their wives filled the lower reaches.

Little was said during the first course. It was a clear bouillon in which swam light and fluffy dumplings with a taste of nuts. The second course — roast geese, their skin crisp, with a different kind of dumpling, sliced, and of heavier consistency — caused a great number of compliments for Lida.

She accepted them gracefully, and hinted that more and equally good things were to come. She was an expert cook, and while the drudgery had been done by the maid and help hired for the day, she had supervised the preparations from beginning to end and had personally salted and peppered and garlicked and paprikaed and basted the birds and mixed the sauce. She knew her people's capacity for eating and their preferences, and she knew that a dinner of this kind would be talked about and that those who partook of it would nurture the memory of it for a long time, their stomachs generating the sympathy that Joseph would need in his work.

Petra was eating daintily and making conversation with Karel, selecting pseudo-mature subjects. They left his mind free to observe and to think. Too much had happened already, and as he looked at the faint shadows of worry around Joseph's eyes, he knew that more was likely to come.

"Aren't you enjoying the dinner, Joseph?" he asked.

"I always enjoy food," said Joseph, "and this is tops." He leaned behind Petra's back to Karel and added, lowering his voice, "Quite a bit of tinder around the table."

Karel wanted to laugh it off, but didn't as he noticed Joseph's momentary unconscious glance rest on Novak.

"Your friend Kravat, for instance," Joseph continued, jocularly, and pointed at the alert long face above the shoddy blue serge, "he's quite capable of exploding the whole class struggle over a dumpling. And I want harmony. There'll be a lot of speeches, and a lot of courses to digest —"

His wary gaze traveled to Thomas.

Thomas was arguing with Novak. "And whom will you employ at the Hammer Works?" he was asking, his voice rising above the table talk.

Novak, slowed down by his one arm, was still eating the goose. He set his fork on his plate. "I guess we'll have to use mostly Sudeten-German personnel. They're still living in Martinice."

"Government policy?"

"No, expediency." Novak turned to Joseph. "We have to make glass, don't we?"

Joseph grunted something. The hum at the lower end of the table died down. Elinor asked Kitty what Thomas was saying.

Thomas's face was flushed. Perhaps the drinks Karel had forced on him were still working. "Why don't you deport them?" he catechized. "The Government said we would! Why don't we get rid of them once and for all?"

Karel feared that the trouble to Joseph would come from within the family rather than from the latent antagonism between the Works Council and the National Administrator. Why was the Martinice situation, of all things, so aggravating to Thomas? Well, it was the Germans who had driven him out, broken up the family and his old life, and forced him into Elinor Simpson's hands, into everything which upset and disordered him.

"And you, Mr. Kravat!" Thomas called across the table, "do you know of this plan? What do you have to say about it, you and your Czech union?"

Kravat twirled the stem of his wineglass. Karel signaled him to keep his answer discreet. The melter, taking Karel's slight shake of the head into consideration, said quietly, "I know about the plan. Everything's been agreed on. The Germans will work only in subordinate jobs and only until they can be replaced by trained Czech men. There's no reason to get excited. . . ."

Kitty laid her hand on Thomas's. She had been afraid of this. His anger at having been obliged to attend, his having been caught in his lie to her, his resentment against Elinor's claim to parental rights over the Essay, all the restlessness that was in him, and his revolt against being back in his father's house, had found an outlet and a cause to espouse.

Karel saw Thomas push her hand aside. Challenging Joseph, Thomas demanded, "Are you ashamed of nothing at all, as long as you're making money? Don't any of you have any principles? What was the war about? What have I been writing for?"

Joseph kept his tone in check. "You talk as if I owned the Hammer Works. I don't even own Benda's, you know! What profits we make will go to the Government."

Elinor nudged Kitty for a translation. But either Kitty chose the wrong quotes, or Elinor's mind was far ahead of her and working in another direction — whatever the cause, she addressed Karel loudly: "What did I tell you? Today they're dictating to your brother Joseph what workers he has to employ; tomorrow, they'll dictate to your brother Thomas what to write. You cannot have half freedom, half dictatorship —"

"That's not quite the issue," said Karel.

Thomas slapped at the new gadfly. "No one's going to tell me what to write, Elinor. I write what I like, I protest when I like, and I'm protesting now!"

"Bravo!" said Elinor. She wanted to say more, but she was hemmed in by one maid serving her strudel and another pouring her coffee.

"Well, Thomas —" Karel edged in, not so much for the sake of Joseph who was scratching his brows, but so as to spare Kitty — "Councilor Novak, and Kravat here, and myself — all three of us saw the Germans at very close range and were imprisoned by them. If we can get over our aversion and see the necessity of using them for a while to help us produce and rebuild —"

"I know, I know! I'm not in your class. I should keep my mouth shut. . . ." Thomas sat back. The sharp line of his lips looked odd above his soft, delicate chin.

"I hate the Germans, too!" Petra asserted. "I wanted to kill the German commander!"

Karel had completely forgotten her presence, and her unexpected declaration fell heavily. He read on Thomas's face: *Even the child outclasses me!* Damn the whole dinner, he thought, his eyes seeking Kitty's. She was staring at her coffee cup. If only he could tell her that the body blow he had delivered to Thomas had been anything but intentional! He felt for Thomas. He felt for Joseph, too, whose great evening was falling to pieces. And most of all, he felt for Kitty.

He saw a movement above the fuchsia scarf. He saw narrowed pupils assay Novak. At the lower end of the table, they were talking about small matters, again. He wondered whether she would now tangle with Novak on socialism. This he must hear.

"I take it you're against the capitalistic system, Councilor," Elinor began. Novak's lines folded themselves into pleasant agreement.

"But without it," she said, "we'd still burn candles instead of electric lights, and ride around in oxcarts instead of automobiles."

"Certainly."

"So it's been pretty good, after all?" she inquired lightly.

"Yes."

"Well?" she pounced.

"If you break your foot, Miss Simpson, your doctor will put on a plaster cast. Am I right, Karel?"

Karel nodded.

Elinor said, "I don't see what that has to do —"

"One moment, Miss Simpson. The plaster cast helps your bones to mend and protects your foot, doesn't it?"

"Yes."

"So the plaster cast has been pretty good, after all?"

"Yes. . . ."

Karel grinned. It was the old Novak, the old game of dialectics they had played when they both were sitting in Buchenwald.

"But there comes a day," said Novak, "when you cut it off and are very glad to be rid of it, isn't that so?"

"You're facetious, Councilor!"

"You're inconsistent, Miss Simpson," he smiled.

"Now wait a minute!" Elinor objected.

Karel was aware that those who spoke English were enjoying the repartee, with the exception of Joseph, whose heavy lids didn't hide his concern, and of Lida, who looked as if she were comparing notes on himself and Novak.

Elinor's hackles were up. "Wait a minute, Councilor! You must admit that the human progress achieved under the capitalistic system is due to the private initiative of the individual."

"Conceded."

"Concretely speaking — Mr. Joseph Benda, our host, came back from the war and found his factory dead, a shambles."

"True."

"By sheer guts and will power, he set out to rebuild it, and he succeeded, and he was ready to do business once more and to contribute to the welfare of his country. What do you think was his motive, Councilor?"

"Private profit."

"Exactly!" It was Elinor who was smiling, now. "But this is the incentive you've taken away. Do you think it's humanly possible for him to show the same kind of initiative now that you've deprived him of his chance of making a fair profit for himself?"

"I think so," said Novak. "Would you want me to ask Mr. Benda?"

"No, of course not!" she said, suddenly recognizing where Novak had led her. "Your question is loaded and would be most unfair."

Joseph straightened. "I wouldn't consider it unfair at all!" he threw in,

only the barest trace of hoarseness betraying what he felt. He looked squarely at Novak. "I assume that the Government must have some confidence in me."

Very shrewd, thought Karel. A whole lot had remained unsaid, and the half-answer, with one swoop, had placed Joseph at the helm of the situation.

Novak was studying the liqueur which had followed the dessert and coffee. Then he stood up.

Into the silence that settled around the table, he said in Czech, "We've been having some sort of discussion here, about socialism. Since today marks an occasion, and a very important one, for our host, let me make a few remarks in connection with this discussion."

He gave a bow of apology to the others and, in his deliberate English, told Elinor what he had said.

"We have nationalized the glass furnaces, at Benda and at Hammer, among others. We will now produce for ourselves, more and better than ever before. We will produce for a richer life for all the people. This will have to be done according to plan, and such a plan will be forthcoming."

He paused and gave his courtesy translation.

Karel kept his eyes on Joseph. Joseph seemed occupied with his own thoughts; he was rubbing his hands nervously.

"Under this plan," Novak went on, "the private and the socialized sectors of our economy will work hand in hand. This ought not to be too difficult. In Mr. Joseph Benda, whom we gladly appointed as National Administrator of both the Hammer and the Benda Works, and in Mrs. Lida Benda who, I understand, owns one of the refineries here in Rodnik, we have within one family our present national picture."

The smooth surface of our present national picture, Karel paraphrased silently, recalling Professor Stanek's analysis.

"Within one *happy* family!" Novak added, and began to tell Elinor the gist of this part of his talk.

She listened closely. In one tier of her multileveled mind, she was drafting the column she would one day write about him. It was a honey of a story: A fairly young, cultivated official, who had suffered much, and who was not stupid at all — he believed in this new setup and worked for it, hard and devotedly — but slowly, everything he did would fail because it couldn't be otherwise and because his premises were cockeyed — and by and by he would begin to see that instead of the plenty he wanted for everybody, all he helped to achieve was a drab, dissatisfying life beset with scarcities and regimentation — the doubts would come which he would not dare to utter for fear of the men in his office and the police, and more im-

portant, for fear of admitting to himself that he had been wrong and had given his brain and his energy and his devotion to a miserably mistaken speculation — and then the breakdown.

"And so, Joseph Benda," Novak concluded, "all I can wish you on behalf of my distinguished chief, Minister Dolezhal, and myself, is *Good Luck!*"

The table applauded. Karel clapped, too, trying at the same time to calculate roughly how much of the enjoyable little speech had been sincere, how much irony, and how much a warning. In one aspect he was relieved: He didn't have to say anything to Novak about his brother. Joseph was pumping Novak's hand. His face was aglow as it should be, because the evening was nearly wound up without a major fracas.

"Thank you, thank you!" said Joseph.

And there was something else on his face, something hidden, something which roused in Karel the same disagreeable flurry as when Joseph had pulled his trump in Lida's office by saving Blaha's job.

"Ladies and gentlemen!"

Quiet set in.

"Only yesterday I had the pleasure," Joseph began, "of talking to Minister Dolezhal over the phone. He has endorsed what I'm going to say."

He glanced at Lida; her face was a study in conjecture, apprehension, and vexation. Karel's expression was noncommittal; but he knew Karel could have no idea of his relationship to Dolezhal. Novak's lines had slipped back into their woodcut stiffness; Dolezhal had kept his word and left the Councilor in the dark.

"I am honored by the trust which the people, through our Government, have put in me. I've always been a good businessman; I shall be a good Administrator. However, in these days, a man must see farther than his desk, or his machine, or his plant. He must have in mind the whole nation, its welfare, its growth, its future. It is in this spirit that I am using this opportunity to make an announcement."

His grave tone, his fists stemmed on the table before him, his solemn expression, his whole bearing lent the moment austerity. Karel sat uneasily.

"Ladies and gentlemen, friends, my dear wife — I shall be a candidate for election to the Constitutional National Assembly."

He leaned over and kissed Petra tenderly.

"What is it? What did he say?" asked Elinor.

Karel told her as briefly as possible, and then left her to her inanities.

He was trying to come to grips with himself. He knew that Joseph's sensation had supplied the other half of the answer to Novak's loaded question. Into his consciousness floated the green-shaded lamp and the maroon-covered table and the glittering pince-nez, and he felt his doubts

over his own reply to Professor Stanek. Perhaps one would have to march, even if the band played crudely.

Joseph climbed into his bed and stretched out. There had been a lot of drinking and toasting after the announcement, even though Novak and Kravat and their henchmen had been reserved and thoughtful. His brothers, too, had been reticent — that was to be expected; his candidacy made the whole balance within the family sway violently and lopsidedly.

He had drunk with everyone toasting him, and he had drunk honestly. It didn't affect him; he could trust his head to stay clear up to the point of his passing out; and he had avoided that point. Now, as he lay back on his pillow, the ceiling kept sliding off to the right, and he laughed at it out of his firm and scientific conviction that his bed would stand on its four legs upright and in place, with him inside it.

Through the open door to the bathroom, he heard Lida brushing her teeth and gargling. He thought of the shocked silence with which she had greeted his momentous statement, and of the quick changeover she had made to being the adoring and gracious wife of an important citizen. He chuckled. She was all right. She was a good and loyal girl, and he had taught her a lesson. He had taught everybody a lesson.

"Lida!" he called.

She finished and came in, the light from behind her making her nightgown transparent. He reached out his hand and pulled her close. She sat down on his bed.

"You're nice," he said, "I like you."

She looked at him. "You're drunk."

"A little. Today's the day!"

"You've made a fool of me."

"Now, now," he said, "let's not be so sensitive. This was a deal between me and Dolezhal. Think of how it'll sound: Mrs. Deputy Joseph Benda."

She made a move to get up. He held her. "I'm not sleepy yet. I want to talk a little."

"You said yourself you were drunk."

He raised his finger and brought it in a straight line to the tip of his nose. "See?"

She laughed and ruffled his hair and bent down to kiss him good night — the same slight, impersonal kiss she gave him every night. He grabbed her shoulders.

"I'm tired," she said. "I worked very hard."

"Oh."

His hands fell back. She turned out the lights and opened the window. He heard the springs of her bed creak and her soft groan as she pulled

up her covers and settled in the pillows. It was a silvery night, and the squares of the windows were cut out as daintily as on an old silhouette.

"I forgot to thank you," he said after a while.

She did not answer, and he wondered whether she had already fallen asleep.

"You think you're very big, don't you?" she said suddenly. "But you're like a postmaster transferred from a small town to a larger one; you still remain a postmaster."

She was trying to get even with him. "The Hammer Works aren't a post office," he answered.

"It's funny," she said. "They're what you always wanted, and now that you've got them you don't have them at all."

His eyes had adjusted themselves to the dimness. He could see her bottles gleaming on the dresser, and the curve of one of her shoulders. "That isn't so funny," he said, his irritation showing. She had a remarkable gift for letting her sharp edge cut him where he was sorest.

"You must have thought about it some more . . ." she suggested.

"Suppose I have!"

"And . . . ?"

"Why do you think I'm going into politics?"

"I wouldn't know," she said. "You didn't tell me about it."

"To change things, my dear!"

"You don't believe that yourself. There's a preponderance of Socialist elements, remember?"

She listened to him move in his bed; he couldn't find a comfortable position. She thought she had the solution; it had occurred to her when that objectionable Novak had babbled of co-operation between the private and the socialized sectors. She was never one to shoot for the stars when closer game was around.

He was finally lying still. "As Administrator of both Benda and Hammer," she said, "you'll be controlling the output of all the furnace-blown hollow glass in this region."

"Some control!" he said. "I'll have to produce and produce well and produce profitably, otherwise they'll take away the Hammer Works as suddenly as they gave them to me—and the Benda Works, too."

"Sure. But you'll produce. And you'll direct to which refineries the glass will go."

He sat up to get a better look at her. She lay completely relaxed, her skin very white in the light of the winter moon. He scratched his chest. "They'll watch me," he said.

She yawned, "There is nothing illegal about it!"

He lay back again. As the details of the room had gradually become

visible to him, so now the whole picture of her plan emerged before his mind's eye. "You'll stand to make a lot of money by that arrangement," he grinned.

"Someone in the family ought to make it," she said factually. "They've reduced you considerably. You're only an official."

"That's right," he said, riled. "Only a lousy little Government official."

"Vesely's, of course," she went on, "is not big enough to handle all of the Hammer and Benda production, nor even most of it. But we can enlarge. And we can farm out some of the work to home workers and to the smaller refineries. We'll do it little by little."

He saw the scheme, and he saw beyond it. He saw that by controlling the raw glass he was also controlling Vesely's and Lida. It was funny, all right, but the humor was not where she had thought it was.

"What are you laughing about?" she asked. "You aren't still drunk?"

"I wasn't laughing. I was thinking of the risk. You have a blind spot for everything else when it comes to making money. The other refineries are going to kick like hell if I cut them down little by little —"

"Are they?" she said sleepily. "They'll think twice before kicking against Deputy Benda."

It was a new way of looking at his political mission. It was a natural. He thought about it, trying to find flaws, but there were none.

"Lida?" he said.

He heard her breathing, deep and regular. The moon was sinking behind clouds, now, and the room darkened.

CHAPTER EIGHT

LIDA swallowed her pride and acknowledged that Joseph's moves had made sense. His secretiveness rankled; but it was her own mistake not to have seen that each of his public actions and utterances had been part of a design. In giving work to the crippled Blaha he had laid the foundation, in talking of the need for new social legislation he had erected the beams, in accepting without protest all the restrictions of his new position he had built the roof, and in opening his house to an assortment of ill-dressed and awkward and boring officials he had furnished the trappings for an edifice he must have had in mind since their first visit to Dolezhal.

As a team, Lida concluded, she and Joseph were exceptionally well-

matched. He had the imagination and the long-range perseverance of the Bendas; she had the earth-bound practicality of the Veselys. He was subject to flights of fancy and excessive depressions; she could balance him. He saw his politics in a large concept; she could implement them and convert them to immediate advantage. He was third generation and had the security of established wealth; she always had known, and in the dark dank cold single little room in wartime Prague had had branded into her hide, that security meant having and possessing. He would do the talking and handshaking, he would receive the applause; she would attend to the spadework. There was in every great man's life a woman who made his greatness possible. She would not let him forget her indispensability.

She had Kitty for tea, for a womanly chat. She was not so primitive as to state that Thomas must commit himself openly in support of Joseph's candidacy, because what would they think in Rodnik, in Limberk, and in Prague if a Benda was taking leadership in national affairs and the ex-Spokesman of the Czech people wrapped himself in silence, and what could Kitty do about it?

She said, "It's a shame that something has come between Thomas and Joseph. I don't know what's at the bottom of it; but Thomas behaved disgracefully at the dinner the other day."

Kitty stirred the tea in her cup although the sugar was long dissolved. Obviously, Lida had not invited her to rehash an incident which had become town gossip. "The Germans," she said cautiously, "are like a toothache to him—he wants the tooth out. Besides, he criticized Novak and Kravat just as sharply."

"Well—yes," retreated Lida. "Except it was such a nice party, and that was the one jarring note. There is a time and a place for everything, at least I think so."

"My dear," said Kitty, "you know you can't tell Thomas about social matters. He refuses to be concerned. He didn't want to come to the dinner in the first place. . . ." Underneath the casual manner ran the thought: What is she after? She hasn't had me at her house since Heaven knows when; she neglects an afternoon's work in her office; and I have only one vote.

"Lovely suit you're wearing," said Lida. "American, of course?"

"American."

"It does very well by you."

Kitty could hear no trace of envy, although Lida was dressed simply, too simply—just an ordinary brown house dress without any frills and without much fit. Why would Lida, even though they were alone, permit herself to be outshone?

As if she had guessed Kitty's thoughts, Lida went on, "You don't have to pretend before me. You and Thomas are in strapped circumstances?"

There was no condescension, no gloating; her inquiry seemed to have come from the heart.

"I've heard it from Joseph," said Lida. "He's been worrying about it, ever since he's had to stop sending the checks from Thomas's share in the Benda Works. We're not so well off, either, Kitty. Joseph is only drawing a salary, and it's nothing compared to what we used to have. . . ."

Was Lida telling her that she was overdressed? She had not bought a thing since America. "I'm thinking of going back to nursing," Kitty said wearily. "And Thomas will get an advance on his new book."

Lida smiled sympathetically. "I've asked you to come this afternoon, Kitty, because I want neither of our men to know about this. I'd like to give you some money —" She ward off Kitty's objection. "I can afford it, out of Vesely's. We still own *that*, thank God. *I* own it," she corrected, "and I can do as I please with my money."

She saw Kitty's surprise change to embarrassment. She poured her some more tea and offered her the platter with the cookies left over from the big celebration and said offhandedly, "I have not talked to Joseph about it. It's entirely my idea."

"But why, Lida? Why would you want to do such a thing?"

Lida sighed. A certain Niobe-like quality showed in her bearing, and she really believed in what she was saying. "If none of you have any feeling for this family, and for its belonging together, and for what is proper — I have! No Benda woman should have to go out and seek work. None of our men should have to pinch pennies and be unable to do what he's set his heart to! We should not have to become like the others, like bookkeepers and laborers and kitchenmaids."

Lida's snobbery was so well integrated with clan spirit and the knowledge of Thomas's actual needs, that Kitty had no immediate answer. Her own father had been a minor employee in the Benda plant, and she herself had worked all her life until she married Thomas. And Karel, though by no means fully recovered, was working, too.

"Don't misunderstand me," said Lida. "There's nothing wrong with work. I work, every day. If you want to, Kitty, go and look for work; but take your time about it. And give Thomas a chance to write his book in peace and without being pressured by that kind of problem."

It sounded sensible. It sounded genuine, and generous. Over her cup, Kitty eyed Lida. Lida's face was serious, and not unkind.

"There are no strings attached," shrugged Lida, "if that's what's holding you back. I'm sure, if you had the money and I had to have it for Petra and for Joseph, you would make me the same offer."

That was true, thought Kitty, and felt easier.

"I want this to be the beginning of something new." Lida pulled up her chair so closely that their knees nearly touched. "I want this family to be as it was. I want Joseph and Thomas —"

She broke off. She could be emotional, all right, although the work she did and the wares she sold and the figures she dealt in were not conducive to sentiment on an average day. She went to a bookshelf and returned to Kitty with a heavy buckram-bound volume in her hands.

"Do you know what this is, Kitty? It's Thomas Benda's collected works — I'd say that not even you have so complete a collection — every article he ever wrote, the manuscript to every speech he ever made. Joseph saved and treasured every line. Thomas was very dear to him, and still is — perhaps because Thomas was the baby in the family. And when Thomas became famous, Joseph was so proud of him. . . ."

Kitty took the big book and opened it carefully, lovingly. From every story, every scrap, symmetrically pasted on large Manila sheets and annotated in Joseph's fine, small handwriting, the Thomas of the past spoke to her — the boy with his troubles, the lover, the man who had taken her to the wide land across the ocean and to the much wider land of his dreams.

"Those were good times," said Kitty, still holding the book open on her lap, "but so much has happened meanwhile." She didn't know whether it had happened to her, or to Thomas, or to everybody, and whether it had been bound to happen.

"Nothing has happened between Joseph and Thomas," Lida asserted, "that couldn't be settled by one good talk."

A money grabber . . . ! It echoed through Kitty's mind. *A self-centered, self-imagined giant with feet not even of clay but of pigeon dirt!*

She closed the volume and handed it back to Lida. Her nostalgia vanished. She knew how much of Joseph's ideas, transmuted, lifted to a new level, reshaped, and with the unmistakable luster of Thomas's words, had ended in these yellowing clippings. That's why Joseph had collected them. But she also knew that Joseph's term as spiritual regent over Thomas was a thing of the past. There was, of course, Elinor the pretender. Thomas had bellowed when she asked about that. He had called Elinor a presumptuous ass. If he wrote about freedom, he had said, it was because he was free of Elinor, too. . . . Kitty frowned. What mattered was that he was writing again, and that this fragile effort must be protected.

"One good talk!" repeated Lida. Her eyes were small, now; she looked at Kitty the way she would scrutinize a salesman. "You still love Thomas, don't you?"

"Yes, of course!" Kitty said quickly. "What makes you ask?"

Lida hugged her elbows as if she felt cold. "It must have occurred to you," she said, "that when Joseph and Thomas were close to one another, things were a lot cozier, too, between you and Thomas. Or am I wrong?"

The spoon with which Kitty tried to stir her lukewarm tea chattered against the thin china. "If I went to Thomas — No, he would refuse point-blank."

"In all these years," remarked Lida, "you should have learned to handle your husband."

Kitty laughed uncomfortably. "He's not a run-of-the-mill husband."

"Then — who has some influence over him? Karel?"

Kitty had thought of Karel before. She had hoped Lida would forget about him; but now it seemed as if all of Lida's oblique and not so oblique thrusts had verged toward this point. But Karel, and everything connected with Karel, had to be left out of this.

"Do you think I should go and see him?" asked Lida, innocuously enough.

"No. . . ." Kitty hesitated. Karel, in the kindness of his heart, might do just what Lida wanted him to do. Perhaps it was right and proper that he should try to reconcile his brothers — but if it meant throwing Thomas and subverting his work? Perhaps, thought Kitty, she was exaggerating Thomas's sensitivity and seeing complications where there were none.

"You say No." Lida's lower jaw was set. "Then how about you? I'm sure you're the better person to swing Karel, and I know you can be quite subtle when you want to. Will you do it?"

"I don't know. . . ."

"It has to be done," said Lida. "Something has to be done about this family!"

"I'll try my best." Kitty was unable to hide her anxiety, and again suffered under Lida's scrutiny.

"More tea?" asked Lida.

"Thank you, no."

Later, in the doorway, Lida seemed suddenly to remember. "How much money will you want, Kitty, and when?"

"Oh, that!" said Kitty. "Don't even mention it; I hope to get along without it. It was very kind of you —"

"You call on me when you need it! Promise me — you won't have any compunctions about it?"

Then Lida closed the door slowly and went back into her house. She relaxed control over her face and let it show her worry. Gradually, the worry resolved into satisfaction. Nobody could blame her for preferring the kind of investment which cost her nothing.

It had been a full day for Karel. He had spent the morning in the dispensary at the Benda Works, examining some fifteen men. There were no previous records; he had to start from scratch, taking their medical histories, listing their complaints, giving each one a thorough checkup, beginning with blood count and urinalysis.

After lunch, he had gone to his office—or to that part of his flat which served as an office—and had put in another five hours. When the last patient had been sent home, he sat down and wrote out his reports for the National Health Insurance people. His head ached, the lettering on the badly printed government forms swam before his eyes, and by the time he was through he had no appetite left. He had been able to give each of his office patients precisely eight and three quarter minutes of his time. He needed another doctor in Rodnik, and there was none to be had. A nurse might do. He needed Kitty.

Out of his desk drawer he pulled a short, stubby pipe and an old tin box filled with some sort of dried leaves which were being sold as tobacco. Pipe smoking was better than no smoking; cigarettes were too difficult to get and too expensive. With his thumb he pressed the tobacco into the bowl of his pipe, lit it, and coughed from the first drag. It would be so easy to ask Kitty and to get her to say Yes; she had a sense of duty, and she'd probably jump at the chance of spending a few hours outside the cage on St. Nepomuk.

He sucked at his pipe and held down another urge to cough. He was growing stronger; sometimes he woke up at night and the loneliness of his bed was oppressive like the clouds of a thunderstorm that failed to break. The bodies in his dreams were no longer the bloody carcasses with the ragged, bluish scars of the whip or with the fresh, straight incisions of his scalpel. The bodies had healed and were alive and voluptuous, though faceless.

The bell rang shrilly. All day long, it rang that way. It was time to have a man look at it and repair it. The landlady was opening the house door. People should have more sense than to come at this hour. Maybe it was Stepanek whose wife was expecting a child, or someone to call him to the pensioner Tyl whose heart was beyond doctoring.

The late visitor was coming up the stairs. Karel groaned, got up, and went into his hallway.

"Kitty!"

The dim bulb of the stairwell cast soft shadows over her face. A second or two went by before he said hoarsely, "Come on in! Come in!"

He switched on all the lights in the flat so as to have their sober glare bring back the sharp lines of chairs and table and poverty and drabness. She took off her hat and coat and hung them on the secondhand clothes

tree Kravat had procured for him; too late he reminded himself to help her and stood uneasily, running his hand through his hair.

"Well!" she said with forced gaiety, "let me see how you live! I should have come weeks ago, but what with Thomas's new book — and the house . . ."

Glad of the diversion she offered, he led her through the flat. He told her of his looting trip with Kravat to the mountain spa. He showed her his instruments and his machines. He watched her interest come awake and grow to admiration; he agreed to a few practical suggestions she made for rearranging this or that, which led to some desultory chitchat about his work and ended with his showing her several slides he had prepared with smears taken from glass-mixers who had lead in their blood. By this time, he had regained his composure and called himself a fool for having let himself be caught off balance and for his latent feeling that it might be impossible to establish between them a perfectly normal and inconsequential relationship.

From his office rooms, he took her to his living quarters. Without the least self-consciousness he smiled as she inspected everything and seemed to note what was missing and what should be improved and that a thorough cleaning job was needed and how shabby and poor this room was — the checkered wax cloth on his table, the straight-backed chairs that must have come from some small town restaurant, the spotted ceiling, the wood of the window sills grooved by weather and age.

"Quite nice, isn't it?" he asked, inviting her to sit in the leather arm chair with the doilies. "What can I offer you?"

She wanted nothing, but finally accepted some mineral water. He found glasses in the kitchen sink, and she joined him to help him wash and dry.

"The charwoman comes tomorrow," he explained. He took the dish towel from her and threw it over a hook.

"It's my fault, really," she said. "I promised myself to come down here regularly and see to it that you live like a human being."

He put bottles, opener, and glasses on a tray and preceded her back to the living room. "Why should you?" he said, letting the water spout into the glasses. "I picked my bed, and even though I have to make it up myself, I sleep fairly well in it."

She sank into the creaking chair and pressed her hot palms against the cool roundness of the glass. She knew that they had exhausted the impersonal subjects and that only two topics remained: themselves, and what had brought her here.

He was waiting, his long hands motionless.

"I gave Thomas his dinner," she said, like a child accounting for her

time, "and he is back at work. I had nothing else to do, and I wanted to talk to you."

"About what?"

"Thomas."

He looked at her and then up at the ceiling, at a splotch shaped like a woman's back.

"Thomas and Joseph," she elaborated.

The voluptuous back turned into the ordinary result of a bad painting job. He fetched his pipe and concentrated on getting it going.

There were tiny, kittenish wrinkles on her nose as she said, "That's horrible tobacco!"

"A cross between hay and potato leaves," he nodded seriously, "or something similar." He felt suddenly ringed by the heavy air of futility. The sooner she went home, the better. "Thomas and Joseph," he asked — "yes?"

"You're not very encouraging," she said restively. "Shouldn't I have come?"

"Good Lord, Kitty, I don't even know what's on your mind. You must forgive me. I'm rather tired after the kind of day I've had."

"Could you use me?" she said immediately, her eyes lighting up. "I could manage to get off part of the day — not regular hours, you know, but an hour here or there. I could do your lab work and take that off your shoulders, or other things. I think I'm still good at being a nurse."

"No, thank you, that won't be necessary," he said more harshly than he had intended.

"Or do something in your flat," she went on, her courage petering out. "It could stand some touching up. . . ."

"It could; yes. But I don't want to take advantage of you. Has anything new happened between Joseph and Thomas?"

"No, I don't think so," she said. The opportunity to establish the intimate atmosphere she needed for disentangling the whole complex of Thomas's feelings, or of her own, was gone.

"He *is* working on his book?" asked Karel.

"Oh, yes."

"Working well?"

"I haven't read any of it. He rarely shows me anything not yet finished," she said defensively.

"I can understand that." Karel dismissed the matter lightly. "And I'm very glad for you — for both of you!"

"I knew you would understand!" she said eagerly. "He has a wonderful mind and a great talent and I won't let anyone threaten his work, because his work —"

"Yes?"

"His work is all that matters!"

Her eyes had darkened, and the hope in them had given way to fear. She was clutching at the idea of Thomas's work as the trapeze artist, hurtling through space, clutches his partner's outstretched hands. Well, who was threatening this work? Karel asked himself. Elinor? Joseph?

"Do you think, Karel," she went on as if driven, "that Joseph's influence would be good for Thomas?"

"What brings that up?"

"Never mind what brings that up! What do you think, Karel?"

There was only one answer. "You and I certainly know better. We both heard Thomas express himself on his opinions about Joseph!" But she had touched on so many angles that he was quite lost as to her motives; or perhaps she was not clear about them herself. "I know that the two of them used to be very close," he continued carefully, "and I presume that some, though not much, of Joseph's essence slipped over into Thomas's work, for better or for worse. What about Elinor Simpson —"

"She has nothing to do with the Essay! I asked him."

"Well, if Thomas is able to dispense with crutches and is finding himself — that's all to the good!"

"Don't you believe," she fidgeted, "that you three brothers —"

She was off again. He spread his hands. "Kitty," he pleaded, "I'm getting mixed up! Either you make yourself clear, or —"

"I'm like a squirrel in a treadmill," she said dejectedly. "I'm moving and I arrive nowhere. To myself I say I must have lost my touch." Nervously, she rubbed her wrists. "Do you know how Thomas and I met?"

"Well — yes! In the Limberk Hospital, wasn't it, when he had pneumonia or something? You nursed him through that —"

She laughed softly. "It goes back farther than that, much farther. He must have been about eleven, and I was close to fourteen, and I was a tall girl for my age. Do you remember that copse behind the burned-out farm they used to call the ghost house?"

"With the huckleberries?" he asked.

"Yes, with the huckleberries. What huckleberries they were, big and juicy!"

"Huckleberries don't grow that big any more, it seems," he said.

"I'd been in the berries. I was barefoot. I wore an old calico dress, with a large gray patch at its side, and I think I was smudged all over. . . ."

The strange thing was that he could see her exactly as she must have looked, with the thin rays of light falling through the trees and adding more patches, golden and yellow, to that calico.

"He came running up the small path to the copse, his arms flailing —" She smiled. "Thomas was never much good at running. And behind him

was a pack of boys, yelling and laughing and pursuing him. Dressed as I was, and all blue with berry juice, he must have thought I belonged to the gang. He stopped, poor kid, and tried to make off into a thicket. And he got caught in the underbrush."

"He should have fought back," said Karel. "They wouldn't have killed him."

Kitty disregarded the comment. "I'll never forget his eyes as he stared at me. I don't think there was real fear in them, rather — well — bewilderment."

"What happened then?"

"I drove the pack off. I scratched up the face of the biggest bully, and then I pulled Thomas off the thorns."

"And?"

"He was still bewildered; it took me some time to make him feel at ease. He came back to me, after that, whenever things went wrong, and I always knew what to do to get him off the thorns. . . . Now I don't know any longer."

Karel rose. The pattern was clear. He knocked the ashes out of his pipe, walked around the table toward the leather chair and stopped in front of Kitty. "This is very difficult," he said. "It makes me feel rotten to see you troubled. What do you want me to do, Kitty?"

"I don't know," she said wretchedly, "I don't know. Lida wants me to patch up matters between Thomas and Joseph; and if I can't, she wants me to get you to try."

"Lida?" he said.

"But couldn't she be right? Maybe what's wrong between Thomas and me grows out of his isolation from Joseph, and from you, too."

"What's wrong between you and Thomas?"

"Nothing." She saw Karel look up. "Perhaps it's actually nothing. I shouldn't have mentioned it."

"Do you love him?"

Lida had asked that. Kitty saw the deep lines around Karel's mouth, the fleshless skin over his sharp jawbones, the heavy, graying brows. "I do love him! Why do you question it? Why does everyone? I'm his wife!"

He nodded. "But do you believe you can make things over? And would you, today, want Thomas as he was before the war?"

"Those were good times. . . ." It was the only answer she could think of, because she had given it to Lida, too. "If Thomas can feel again that he isn't alone, he might stop shutting himself off from me, from all of us."

Karel felt a dull ache. He knew it did not come from any part of his anatomy; it was a pain he felt for Kitty's pain and confusion. What a bundle of illusions she tried to preserve for herself! . . .

"Lida told me that Joseph is just as disturbed over the rift," Kitty said half-heartedly.

Joseph might be, at that, thought Karel. But Joseph was quite self-sufficient and was becoming busier and busier as he picked up more balls to juggle. He had kept Thomas in limbo as their father had tried to keep all three of them; he had used Thomas as an outlet for his ambitions and ideas and as a reason for sacrificing himself to the Benda Works. And now, fighting this political battle, he needed Thomas more than Thomas needed him, and Lida's injecting herself into the situation made it more sordid.

"Joseph is unimportant," he said suddenly. "So is Thomas. You're the one who counts."

She smiled, and the smile made her come alive and made him aware of her lips, her body, the way her hair framed her forehead. He stepped away from her and sat down at the table, leaning his elbows on it and lowering his face into his opened hands.

"Let me explain something," he began. "Thomas and Joseph and I were always close to one another when we had the same opponent — whether it was our father, or the Nazis. Group fears produce group loyalties, if you understand what I'm getting at."

She was not sure that she did, and was afraid that he was edging away from the dilemma which had brought her to him; but she said nothing.

He went on, speaking from under the screen of his fingers. "It's not a specific Benda problem, this drifting apart — it's everywhere. I began to worry about it when I lived up at your house — that long ago. I think the event that drove in the wedge was victory. I can imagine how it must have been — bells, flowers, parades. But then the morning after, with the headache: Now that we have it, this victory, this freedom, what are we going to do with it? Who shall have the power forced out of the hands of the Nazis? In what direction shall it be employed? And with that, our fine unity begins to show cracks. The nation splits up again, the political parties fall out, people are choosing sides —"

"But this is a small family!"

He took his hands off his face and looked full at her. "And what makes us so extra special?"

Half of what he'd said had escaped her. Yet she was frightened, for Thomas, for Karel, for herself. If nations and families were to be rent apart, she would have to choose. She didn't want to. She wanted the present haphazard status to last, with all it entailed — her marriage, and Karel . . .

"I quote you today's price for unity in this family!" she heard him say. She stared at him apprehensively. "Support for Joseph," he said, "for all that Joseph does, in the Benda Works, in Martinice, and in politics."

"Yes, that's possible." She picked up her glass of mineral water, her eyes

following the string of infinitesimally small pearls that bubbled from its bottom. As far as her errand for Lida was concerned — that was settled. But everything else — the unspoken and half-spoken questions which could not be formulated and which had prompted her to follow Lida's lead — was left unanswered.

"I could try; what can we lose?" he said, cornered by her disquiet and his fear that he had let her down. "And suppose we succeed. Suppose we let Joseph barge in on Thomas and overwhelm him with brotherly love and brotherly energy, and the book —"

He stopped. The glass had slipped from her hand and broken, and the water, glistening, was gathering in small puddles on the linoleum.

"That's all right!" He rushed over and raised her up to keep her from wiping up the mess and cutting her hands. And as he had her panic-stricken face close to him, and as her defenses were down, the truth suddenly flashed before him: *He* was the threat to the book, and the book was her tie to Thomas and the buttress of her life with his brother.

He let go of her and went to the kitchen and came back with a pail and a rag. For a minute, he worked, collecting the shards and mopping up the water.

When he had finished, and had put the pail and rag away, and returned to stand disheveled before her, she said tonelessly, "What is to become of us, Karel?"

"The two of us?"

She nodded with a smile that was sadly crooked.

"God knows," he said.

The bell shrilled into their silence.

"That'll probably be the Stepaneks' baby," Karel said. "I've got my night's work cut out for me." He went to the door.

But it was Thomas.

"Kitty here?" he said brusquely, and noticing her coat on the clothes tree, "I see she is." He disregarded Karel, who asked him to take off his topcoat and come in and sit down; he stood for a moment undecided, and as if listening to something inside of himself; then his lips set in their usual line of annoyance and he said, "She didn't tell me she was going here, you know? I guessed it."

Karel said nothing. Kitty was coming out of the living room. Thomas looked at her, or beyond her, but paid no attention to the slight flush on her cheeks.

"It was lonely up there," he said. "Not a sound in the house. It disturbed me. I had to stop work."

"I'm sorry," said Kitty. "Had I known, I would have been back sooner. As it was, Karel and I fell to talking — you must come in, Thomas, and

have a look at his office and his equipment. It's fabulous, it's all modern and quite new and a pleasure to work with."

Thomas let his topcoat slide over Karel's arm. "So?" he said. "Is that so?" He raised his brows apologetically and turned to Karel, "I must be a creature of habit. I hardly notice Kitty around the house, until she isn't there."

If he had planned to plant his foot on his claim, he could not have done it more effectively. Like the blind children, he was above evil and above questioning, and like the blind, he had a terrific hold on everything he touched.

He walked ahead of Kitty and Karel into the living room, glanced around without any curiosity, and said, "You really should get married, Karel. Marry anyone! It's not bad!"

Before Karel could laugh, he passed on to the next, "What did you talk about? Family? Did you know that Lida had Kitty for tea? It's pitiful. Not even Kitty would fall for that kind of thing. But once you touch politics, you get vulgar, that's how it is."

He gazed at his brother until Karel mumbled agreement, then he went on, "You must come up to the house sometime. You must not feel that you've already imposed on us enough; it was no imposition at all, and we like to have you. There's always a meal. You don't work that hard?"

"I keep busy," said Karel.

"It must be very frustrating," said Thomas. "You cure a person, and another one gets sick. Where there's poverty, there's also sickness."

"Yes," said Karel, feeling trapped. "That's approximately it." He watched Thomas get up unconcernedly and tap Kitty's shoulder and heard his languid, "Shall we go home, darling? It's late! Or is there anything else?"

"No," said Kitty, "let's go." Her eyes were dull. The rush of guilt had long subsided, and she looked as if she had been drained of some vital fluid.

Karel accompanied her and Thomas down the stairs and unlocked the house door for them. He stood in the doorway and watched them walk up the street until they disappeared. He breathed in the sharp night air. It would have been better, he thought, if Thomas had made a scene; much better. Except there was nothing to make a scene over, and there never would be.

Poor Kitty.

CHAPTER NINE

JOSEPH came into the furnace hall at Benda. He glanced up at the age-spotted dial of the great clock mounted under the roof, and saw that it showed close to two. The workers on the platform around the furnace pretended not to see him, but he knew that they were conscious of him and were observing every shading of his features. They were no longer in fear of him as they had been before the nationalization; they had learned that he could not fire them without involving himself in a drawn-out rigmarole with the Works Council. They were probably asking themselves what he wanted, ambling through the hall without apparent purpose, giving them an occasional smile of encouragement.

He stopped his tour to watch the team working under Master Viteslav Czerny. They were making glass pitchers ordered by a firm in Switzerland, three thousand of them. The team had been at it for days, and by now its routine was so pat that the men didn't have to think about what they were doing.

To Joseph a pitcher like that wasn't just an item to be shipped off and sold for twelve crowns, of which the team would receive one third to be split up among the six of them according to their share in the work and their skill. It was a small part of his life. He still could stand there and watch them make each piece, fascinated by its growth and by the miracle of something being created out of nothing through the labor of the human hand.

He doubted if the little master or any of the men, intent only on their own role, ever followed the process through all the way and were aware of the majesty in it. The gatherer dipping a blowpipe into the pan filled with molten glass inside the furnace, and withdrawing it with a bullet of fire attached to its end — how could he see more than this? All the man did was to judge the moment when the gob at the end of his pipe had achieved the right consistency, puff slightly into the pipe and hand it quickly to the first blower. The first blower dipped it back into the pan and brought it out of the melt with the exact amount of molten glass to make the body of the pitcher. That was this worker's great art, the uncanny gift of measure by eye, the twist of the arm in lifting out of the furnace the viscous matter clinging to the original gob.

Once Joseph's father had made him try the trick. He had spilled the

glass over the platform, where it had cooled in a few seconds and become pancake-flat with hundreds of brittle rays stretching away from it. The men had laughed.

Joseph chuckled at the memory as he saw the first blower raise his pipe, like a trumpeter raising his instrument for a solo, swing it and draw fiery arcs and then lower it down to his feet, rotating it and blowing all the while until the fireball at its end reached the desired size.

The workers appeared to be completely indifferent to the glowing arcs curving within inches of them. They went about barefoot or in worn-out slippers, in flimsy pants and ragged open shirts, spurning illusory protections, relying on themselves and each other to stop the swinging fire just short of their skins.

Joseph's eyes returned to the creation. The second blower had grabbed the pipe and was stepping to the rim of the platform. The white heat of the glass had changed into yellow as the man suspended it into the beechwood form whose two halves, wetted through and through, were held open by the helper. The helper closed the form, and steam rose into Joseph's face. Through it, Joseph saw the second blower up on the platform twirl his pipe and blow until his cheeks billowed out and his eyes protruded. A bell-shaped cap of glass oozed out of the top of the form, linking the end of the pipe to the fetus inside the wood. A nod from the blower, and the helper opened the form. This was the moment of birth, to Joseph always charged with a thrill although he had witnessed it countless times. At the end of the pipe, still held to it by the cap, hung a pitcher.

Master Czerny brushed by Joseph, filling his nostrils with the pungent smell of sweat.

"Give me that rod!" said Joseph, and took out of the master's hands the thin iron bar he was holding. Viteslav Czerny glanced at him sourly; if Joseph messed the job, he and his team would be out four crowns. But Joseph was already pressing the tip of the rod to the bottom of the pitcher, which, still hot, stuck to it easily. Up on the platform the blower softly, almost lovingly, knocked against his pipe, detaching the glass cap from the top of the pitcher. Its bottom safely adhering to the tip of the rod, the pitcher changed hands to Joseph.

Joseph looked up impatiently. Everything now was speed and precision, every second cooling the glass might make it too cold to work with. But there was the fellow he was waiting for! From the end of his pipe, the second gatherer let dangle before Joseph a blob of glass, stretched by its own weight into the shape of a cocktail sausage. Joseph reached for the master's iron tweezers, grabbed the end of the sausage and pasted it, hot, to the side of the pitcher. Twisting off the other end, he attached that, too, aligning it to the top, and forming a handle.

By now, Joseph felt the sweat on his upper lip and his chest. It tickled him, but he had no hand free to wipe or to scratch. His hands were busy rotating the pitcher and stretching the handle with a wooden stick until dexterous manipulation and its own gravity had given the pliable glass of the handle a perfect curve.

Joseph held the finished piece up to Master Czerny. "Pretty good, no?"

"Pretty good," said the thin little man, already working on the next pitcher. "Would you like to switch jobs?"

Joseph guffawed and lightly slapped the other's bony shoulder. "Sometimes I feel like it, I honestly do. When I look at the pile of responsibilities I have, I consider you fellows lucky!"

Viteslav Czerny did not answer. Apparently, he felt the conversation was closed. Joseph bent down to the helper who sat on an overturned box, hunched over the form which his crippled hands were opening and closing according to the signals from the second blower.

"How are you coming along, Blaha?" asked Joseph.

Blaha grunted something.

Joseph would not be discouraged. "This is only a beginning," he said. "Later on, I'll be able to give you a better job."

Blaha glanced at the helpers of the other teams. They were either women or boys just out of school. "I'm not complaining," he said finally.

"I didn't say you were. You're getting your old pay, regularly?"

"Yes, Mr. Benda."

Blaha hunched deeper over the form. His apron was stretched taut over his legs and could not hide the trembling of his knees. The helper's work was by no means easy, Joseph knew that. For eight hours, with two half-hour breaks, Blaha sat crouched at the foot of the platform, seeing fiery balls descend in front of his eyes and iridescent pitchers rise up again to heights beyond his reach.

Joseph looked up at the clock. The red flag and the Czech flag suspended next to it wafted gently in the hot air from the furnace. Any second now, the bell would sound: two o'clock. He had timed his inspection right. The men would quit work, and he would casually stand in the doorway and be able to say a few words to each of them as they trooped out. He didn't care if some of them thought he was electioneering; most of them would feel flattered and like it.

Sometimes, he despised himself. What were they, what did they have to offer that he had to sidle up to them? A vote—that's what they had. Democracy, with all its by-products—that's what they had.

They were so well off, they didn't even appreciate it. A whole afternoon and evening belonged to them, with nothing to do but putter around the

house, or read the newspaper, or play with their kids, or sleep. He, however, would have to drive over to Martinice. One of the furnaces at Hammer was producing, at last; he must see to it that they executed the latest batch of orders from the new Glass Institute in Prague, which was establishing itself as a solid export monopoly. He must discuss the work schedule with the Martinice foremen and listen to them whine about the threatened deportation to Germany. He must arrange for them to make their promised deliveries to Lida at Vesely's. At home, at least, he wanted his peace. But he wouldn't even have his evening at home. Instead, he would grab a bite to eat in Martinice, and from there drive directly to the district office of Dolezhal's Party in Limberk, to spend half the night in planning the details of his campaign — where he was to speak and when, what public appearances he was to make and in which capacity.

Joseph saw the workers finishing up, placing their pipes against the iron racks on the platform, and piling their forms and ladles on the work benches. The bell went off with its rusty quaver, the hour hand moved to the 2, the minute hand jumped across the 12, another workday was over.

Joseph found himself caught in the bustle of workers streaming toward the doorway. Some of them were courteous enough to make room for him, but he waved them on good-naturedly, indicating by his gesture that they had done the hard part of the labor and therefore deserved to be let out first.

They were the sort of people who responded kindly to kindness, because they had never been spoiled by too much of it, and because they were simple and forgot their grudges easily. Joseph had little love for them as a mass; he did like them as individuals, and this feeling transmitted itself easily to the men.

They stopped to nod to him or to shake his hand; knowing each of them, he could say the right things, ask the right questions, make the right jokes. Master Viteslav Czerny, now relieved from the pressure of work, remarked that Joseph was still able to turn out a pretty good piece of hollow ware, and cackled he would hand over his job to Joseph any day! Those on Czerny's team who had seen Joseph attach the handle to the pitcher, assented noisily. Even Blaha bore Joseph's crack, "On your way, now, man! Don't be late, or those kids of yours will start their dinner without you!" Everybody laughed at that, because Blaha was known to be a strict disciplinarian at home. And Joseph, who was by nature unsophisticated, began to enjoy himself and to warm up in the sun of public favor.

Gradually, however, he sensed a disturbing influence. Not that the men had ceased to be friendly — they had to get through the doorway, after all, and to go home — it was something else.

Over the heads of the others, he discovered Kravat's eyes observing him

caustically below their pushed-up brows. Kravat must have been standing there quite a while, having his own thoughts about the show.

Joseph's jokes became less inspired, his words less assured, his handshakes less hearty. The effect of this on the men still around him was immediate; their smiles waned, their expressions grew wary, they withdrew into themselves; and the last workers walked by Joseph and out of the hall without so much as a glance.

Kravat was scratching his pate as he faced his chief in the empty doorway. Joseph glowered at him, silently. After a while, his face changed, a twinkle appeared at his eyes, and he began to laugh.

"Well, what do you think of it, Kravat?" he said.

"Not bad!"

Kravat went ahead of Joseph to the platform. Some helpers brought in a trough full of finely ground shards of old green glass, and left.

"This is for the overlay vases we're blowing tomorrow," Kravat said. "The base glass will be dark green, very nice color."

"I want to talk to you, Kravat."

"I'm listening." Kravat dipped his shovel in the trough.

"No — wait a minute with that."

Kravat let go of the shovel and sat down at the edge of the platform.

"You're no fool, Kravat. You know a lot more than you talk about. In fact I would say you're the only one among the workers here with a brain of his own."

"I wouldn't say that, Mr. Benda. Some of them are very intelligent fellows."

"There are brains and brains," said Joseph.

Kravat's eyes were sarcastic again.

"Why do you think I'm running for election?" Joseph asked after a pause. "I have a good job, and the campaign will be a strain on me, and if I should be elected, life won't be any easier."

Kravat turned halfway toward Joseph. "You don't like what's going on in the country."

"You see — I told you you had brains. I suppose you know I'm not the only one who feels that way about things?"

"I imagine there are a few others."

"A few. . . ." Joseph smiled. "The businessmen and the farmers, those who have land and those who are going to get it and want to hold on to it. And the lawyers and doctors and teachers and what have you. And even the workers — you saw what happened there at the door. . . ."

"Why do you ask me, if you're so sure?"

Joseph hesitated. "I'm not what you call a reactionary," he said, avoiding a direct answer. "When I settled with you over Blaha, you must have got-

ten an idea of where I stand. Live and let live. You men have your rights, and I'm the first one to back you up on that."

Kravat looked at his trough. He'd much rather be shoveling glass. He had to keep one jump ahead of Joseph Benda, but it was hard to predict where the guy was going to jump.

"You've been with Benda a long time," said Joseph. "I have a good deal of confidence in you. I'll need a resident manager at the Hammer Works. I have you in mind for the job."

"To get me out of the Works Council here?" Kravat asked back.

"Don't be ridiculous! You know as well as I that this council of yours is a self-perpetuating setup. If you should have to leave it, you'll appoint someone else just as disagreeable. . . ." He laughed.

"So what do you want me to do?" Kravat said bluntly. "Sell out?"

Joseph felt he had the advantage. He now could bear down on Kravat with the full force of moral outrage. "Have I demanded anything from you? What kind of ass do you think I am — trying to bribe you so you can report it hot to your cronies on the Works Council and in the union! Do you want the job or don't you?"

"What are the strings?"

"None."

Joseph stood, calmly observing Kravat's horsy features, the dark, distinct shadows under the melter's lower lip and chin.

Kravat's hands moved over the rim of the platform. It was an ultimatum all right, and they both knew it, and this knowledge kept distracting Kravat. If he pleaded for time to think it over, he would be making the first step toward acceptance, and Joseph would spread the word fast enough. But Joseph hadn't demanded anything. He had only hinted that he and his Party might win the election, and that he was a decent fellow, and then he had made an offer.

It was too easy. Kravat had worked for the Bendas a long time. He had started to work for them when Peter Benda still ruled the Works, and he had learned the making and the mixing and the melting of glass, and he had learned that any gain he and the workers ever made had had to be fought for, and fought for hard. Nothing was ever handed to workers.

Resident manager of the Hammer Works. A little house of his own, a good wage, clean work, no sweat, and quite a bit of responsibility. There were others who could take over the Works Council, Blaha for instance; Blaha would be perfect. And what would they tell him, the men who sat around the table with the maroon-colored cloth at Stanek's house? He could hear them weigh the problem and consider it politically and he guessed their conclusion: The more of our people in positions of responsibility, the better. They would tell him to accept.

"Well, what do you say?" Joseph's voice urged.

Kravat got up on the platform and gripped the handle of the shovel. "I don't want it, Mr. Benda."

Joseph shrugged. "I hope you'll never be sorry for your decision."

"I *am* sorry. A better job means something to me. But I would have to stop being a worker. And the workers would stop listening to me." Now he smiled. "I'd rather have them listen to me than to you. . . ."

"As you wish," said Joseph. He couldn't help admiring the man; but his admiration began to be mixed with active dislike.

Christmas had brought no snow; New Year's had gone by, but by Holy Three Kings, heavy clouds began to swirl around the tops of St. Peter, St. Anna, St. Maria, and St. Nepomuk. The clouds sank lower and lower, pressing in between the trees of the hills, and shrouding the world.

Then snow fell. It fell on the boys of Rodnik who, dressed in night-shirts, golden paper crowns on their heads, their faces blackened with burnt cork, tore through the streets, scared the little girls, and knocked at house doors to beg for sweets and cake and coins for the Holy Three Kings. It fell on the wide lawn behind Joseph Benda's house and formed a smooth white sheet and covered the tiny tracks of the birds as soon as they were made. It was soft, wet snow; it relieved the dull gray of the day a little; but it could not break Petra's melancholy.

She stood at the window staring out at the thick, whirling flakes. The boys with their golden paper crowns had come and gone, treated by the maid to cookies and a handful of homemade candy. The afternoon stretched unendingly, and the year was only beginning.

Petra stuck her nose against the pane and breathed and watched the cloudy circle on the glass grow and disappear. She blew again, drew some initials on the frosted area, and wiped them out hastily.

What if I did it? she asked herself for the tenth time that day. What can happen to me? She was not afraid of punishment; what she feared was rejection, the finality of it. What could she expect but rejection? They were of the same blood, and that was bad. Something would be wrong with the children. But in the first place, it was not a hard and fast rule; in the second place, people didn't always have children; and in the third place, it would be a long time before he would want her to have children.

At twelve o'clock on New Year's night, she had raised her glass of champagne—thank Heavens, there had not been any question about her having the champagne. She had drunk to him with her eyes. He had seen it, he had also raised his glass, and smiled at her. And then, when everybody was kissing everybody, he had kissed her, too; his lips had been cool and light on her cheek, and she could still feel them.

She knew his schedule. If she went to him now, he would not be at his home; this was his afternoon for visiting the sick. But that might be even better! She would slip into his flat — the landlady would let her in; nobody in Rodnik closed the door on a Benda. She would clean his house and his office and be gone long before he returned. He would come back and find everything clean and in place and would see the touch of her hand.

Petra went to her closet and got out her boots and her overcoat and her kerchief. She dressed hurriedly, angry at the resistance her heels offered her boots. Then she tiptoed past the kitchen. The maid was reading the serial in the Limberk paper. Petra quietly let herself out of the house.

The snow was still coming down, and the sound of her steps was swallowed up. When she was little, Karel had given her a fist-size glass ball, with tiny houses and trees inside it. When you shook the ball, it filled up with snow, and the snow would fall mutely for a minute or so. Now Petra felt as if she were moving within such a ball; everything around her was quiet, and ten steps ahead and in back and to the right and to the left of her, the visible world ended. This thought made her happy: Such a silent little world of her own; it would be nice to share it with the one person you loved. Or she could keep on walking, and soon there would be no more Rodnik around her, only the loneliness of the hills and the soft snow which would become deeper and deeper. She would sink in and she would not struggle and, as in Karel's fairy tale, she would find her own tree, a tall, straight, young pine — because every human being had his own tree, the children small ones, and the grownups bigger ones.

Actually, she watched the familiar houses and corners and unerringly made her way uphill and down, to the center of town, near which Karel had his flat. She could have found the house in her sleep, she had walked there so often in good weather and bad, arriving at the house without stopping and passing it without looking up at his windows or at the brass bell at the door or the shingle: *MUDr. Karel Benda*.

This time she stopped and turned the bell and listened anxiously to its echo inside the house.

"Miss Benda!" said the landlady, opening the door a slit and then fully. "Why, you poor dear, you must be wet and chilled all the way through!"

She brushed the snow off Petra's shoulders and untied her kerchief and shook it out on the street. "You come right in and have a cup of tea. Do you want to see the doctor? He isn't in; it's a shame, you having walked all that distance. Is something wrong with you? You look pale. But all fine young ladies look pale nowadays. When I was your age I had cheeks like apples. Give me your coat, Miss Benda, and you come right into my little room and warm yourself up —"

"No, thank you. I'll wait upstairs."

"But nobody is upstairs! The doctor, God bless him, is out visiting the sick, and he won't be back before six, he said —"

"I know."

Petra was walking up the worn-down stairs, the landlady clambering behind her.

"There's no fire in his rooms. I was just about to go and light it so he would have it nice and warm when he came home —"

"I'll light it myself. Is there wood, yes? Then, please, show me where I can find a bucket and broom and a mop and dust rags!"

"But the place is clean! The doctor had the charwoman in only a couple of days ago —"

"Please!" said Petra.

The landlady dropped back, despairingly muttering about how the times really had changed, and what were we coming to when young ladies like Miss Benda had to go and work with the mop and the bucket and the broom.

Petra went through Karel's flat. It was a wonderful flat and she saw the stamp of his personality everywhere. He would have an old-fashioned leather armchair with hand-embroidered doilies, and a table covered with wax cloth. He did not care for luxuries, he was not pretentious, his life was devoted to others.

Carefully, she entered his office rooms. Here, all was functional, geared for work, gleaming in white and black and chromium. She looked at the orderly procession of his scissors and knives and scalpels and pincers and syringes on the glass shelves of his instrument cabinet. She touched the X-ray machine and hastily wiped off the imprint her finger had left on the shining metal. She picked a bit of gauze bandage off the floor and deposited it in the wastebasket which opened when she stepped on a lever.

"Miss Benda!" said the landlady from somewhere behind her, "I've brought you the things out of the kitchen. But you shouldn't have to do it. Let me give you a hand —"

"No, thank you," Petra said without looking around. She was opening a black box which held a collection of slides. She closed the box quickly. The slides were full of germs and bacteria, and he was handling them, disregarding the danger, every day. She wished she could help him. She would learn about germs and bacteria, and how to give injections and how to bandage wounds. She thought of Kitty who knew the whole field and who wasted her time in her fine house on St. Nepomuk while Karel fought disease and germs and bacteria singlehandedly.

Petra sighed. Then she left the office, rolled up her sleeves, and went to work. It was hard work, because she was not accustomed to it, and she

sweated freely. The wood in the little iron stove crackled, and she poured coals on top of the fire.

For an hour or longer, she mopped the linoleum, dusted the furniture, wiped the vases and knickknacks and picture frames, cleaned the dishes in the kitchen, washed down the range, and polished the mirrors. She felt that by her work she was establishing a small claim to his things. When she could think of no more to do, when bucket and broom and mops had been deposited next to the sink, she scrubbed herself clean and combed her hair for a long time. Finally she had it the way she wanted it, the way she had worn it at the dinner party and at New Year's, with the soft curls at the back of her neck forming a kind of chignon. She stepped back from the mirror and examined herself critically. Perhaps she wasn't beautiful; but neither was she uninteresting. The deep brown of her hair brought out the fairness of her skin. She had the high cheekbones of her family; her eyes were a trifle too far apart, but they were dark and shining. She tried out several smiles — a smile of welcome; a shy smile which at any moment she could let melt into an expression of giving and forgiveness; a smile of delight and surprise. Then, suddenly, she broke into giggles. It was silly to rehearse for a something that would never be played. She stuck out her tongue at her reflection and fled from the mirror and fell, tired out, into the leather armchair with the doilies.

It was nearly time to go. Karel was due around six o'clock, and she should be back home for supper. But she had no watch with her and she didn't want to ask the landlady, and the snow, still falling outside, made everything so dusky that perhaps it wasn't near six at all. If Karel came home early and found her still in his flat, it would be fate. She heard the muffled sound of chimes from the old church; she tried to count the strokes, but the thickened air outside made the sounds run into one another like water colors.

She must have dozed off. She came to with a start and knew that it was long past six, maybe seven, or even later. It was pitch dark; the snowfall had stopped, but the heavy clouds, still anchored in the valleys between the mountains, absorbed the light from the stars and the moon. The snow was a gray tinge on the ground instead of the crisp, fresh white which would have made every trunk and branch, every street lamp and roof and wall stand out sharply.

The kettle of water she had placed on top of the stove was singing monotonously, had probably been singing a long while. Where was Karel? Why wasn't he home? Had something happened to him? He had no car, he made his visits on foot, he might have slipped in the snow, broken something, be lying in some ditch, unconscious, or groaning for help. She wanted to run down to the landlady, ask her if Karel had ever been

late before, but she could not face the woman, not just now. Her fingers dug into the soft wood of the window sill — she heard his steps and heard him come into the door and turned and ran to him and cried, "Why are you so late? Why didn't you come on time?"

Karel put his bag on a chair and threw his hat on top of it. He switched on the lamp that hung over the table.

There had been so much possessiveness in her outcry that he curbed his questions. "I've had a couple of difficult cases, Petra," he said. "A doctor can never be quite on time."

"I was so afraid for you." She tried to smile, but no smile would come, neither those she had studied, nor any other.

He took off his coat and carelessly dropped it over the back rest of the chair. Petra picked up the coat and hung it in the closet; she returned for the hat and placed that on the shelf.

He watched her. There was some of Lida's efficiency in her actions, although she was obviously busying herself to overcome her agitation. Then he saw that his house was in beautiful order; he was touched, except that her housewifeliness was so purposeful. Petra was moving through the room with a grace which was new; in the short months since she had met him at the Wilson Station in Prague, she had lost much of her ungainliness and had become almost a woman. And now she was asserting herself, was seizing for herself a place that did not and could not exist: the child-wife, yielding and yet predatory.

At the same time, his whole heart went out to her because he knew how miserable she was and that he must put a stop to this infatuation before she was seriously hurt.

"You needn't have hung my things, Petra. I'm going to take you home."

She was opening and closing her grandmother Anna's brooch. "I don't want to go home!" she said.

He avoided her eyes. The worst of it was he no longer was sure what role he should play.

"You've done a wonderful job with the house. I wish my charwoman could see it. But now I'll take you home — your parents must be frantic —"

"Let me stay a little longer," she said softly. "I'll always come and clean your house. I'll help you in the office. I'll cook for you. Mother says I can't cook so well, but I can do the simple dishes all right. . . . Karel —"

"Uncle Karel!" he corrected her.

"Karel —" she repeated, and this time she was able to smile.

He was angry and embarrassed. The whole predicament was the result of the girl's utter and desolate insecurity, and if Joseph weren't such an egomaniac, he would give up his ambitions and look after his daughter.

"I wonder, Petra," he said, "if you remember the stories I used to tell you."

"Your fairy tales?" she asked patronizingly.

"The one I want to tell you now is a true story. When I was in the concentration camp — what do men talk about at night, in a spot like that? About home, about their families, mostly about their children. So I told them about you, and sometimes they said to me: Karel, you're very lucky to have such a child. And I said: She's not my child, she's my niece, but I love her as if she were my child."

"That's the end of your story?" she asked.

"Yes."

"It would have been nice to have been your child," she admitted. "But now, I don't want to be your child; you understand that, don't you? And I don't want you to feel that I am a child."

Christ Almighty! Every day, he came into the houses of the workers, spoke to their kids, kids of all ages, including Petra's. They had no such problems! . . . Or did they?

"Look here, Petra, I know you're not really a child any more. But if I concede that you're grown-up, I must consider myself old, and I don't like the idea."

It fell flat.

"You're in love," Petra said dully. "You love Kitty."

"Of course I love Kitty! And I love Thomas, and your father, and your mother, and you, too. And I love the few friends I have. Maybe your trouble is that you don't try to love the people you should love!"

"My father and mother don't love me," she said in the same dull voice. "They don't know what's inside of me and what I want. I'm so alone, Karel."

At the thought of her loneliness, her voice clouded and her shoulders fell and she became very much the child.

"Sit here, Petra." He led her to the big chair and made her sit down in it.

He walked up and down, the table between her and him, trying to conceal his compassion, trying to find a constructive approach. How could he straighten her out without treating her as a grownup? How could he treat her as a grownup, without acknowledging her right to her feelings?

"People grow and develop," he began hesitantly, "and as they do they go through certain crises. When I was your age, my mother — your grandmother Anna — died. And your grandfather Peter Benda, after whom you were named, was a difficult man. Well, I had my brothers, so I wasn't so alone. But you know how different we are from each other, your father, and your Uncle Thomas, and myself. The best thing I ever did was to

leave home and go to Prague to study. I had to fight for it, too; because your grandfather Peter was against it. In Prague, I met people my own age who shared my interests, and I made friends, and all the problems that I thought I'd never master suddenly became clear and simple. If I had stayed in Rodnik, I believe I would have grown up to be a very unhappy man — ”

“Do you want me to go to school in Prague?” she asked, with apparent interest.

“We could think about it.”

“And you would tell my father to send me?”

“I would — if you wanted me to — ”

She dropped her sensible manner. “You want to get rid of me!” she said with deep bitterness.

“You would find friends — ” he said. “Girls your own age — ”

She jumped up. “I don't want girls my own age!” She snatched up her coat and kerchief, and threatened, “If you tell my father to send me to Prague — I'll never forgive you. . . .”

“Petra!” Karel caught her hand and held it. “Get hold of yourself!”

“Take me home,” she said, “please.”

“She gave us some fright!” Joseph said.

Karel nodded slowly. “I wanted to telephone you, but it just wasn't possible.”

“We weren't home, anyhow,” said Joseph. “You don't know how badly I feel about this. Just imagine if something had really happened to her — but she's a big girl, she should know how to take care of herself. I always forget. I always see her as she was years ago, such a cuddly little thing. . . . What got into her? Why did she come to you?”

Karel sipped his drink.

“Refill?” asked Joseph.

“Yes, thanks. That's good brandy!”

“The best.”

“There is nothing seriously wrong with her. The only thing wrong is that she had to come to me. She's alone too much.”

“I know.”

“She's not a baby, Joseph. In this day and age, they grow up fast, they need someone to help them.”

“I don't understand it,” Joseph said glumly. “When we were that young, we had friends. We weren't particular. But the girls she meets in school seem to leave her cold. Maybe they're a different class of girls, maybe it's because she was away from Rodnik for so long. . . . If I'm elected, I'm going to take her with me to Prague.”

Karel thoughtfully fingered the line of his jaw. *If you tell my father to send me to Prague, I'll never forgive you*, Petra had said.

"If you're elected," he argued. "And if you're not? And meanwhile? May is a long way off. . . . Petra is your child. But what are you doing? What's Lida doing? — Business, business, politics!"

The planes on Joseph's face appeared hollow. He was overworked, harassed — and now this. "I love the kid," he said, "but I've got so little chance to show it to her. I was a stranger to her when I came back from England, and I'm afraid that I've become more of a stranger to her since."

"You have to give up something, Joseph. Suppose you succeed and become a big man and get all the power you want — and your child breaks up in the process?"

Lida entered quietly. "I'm all in," she said. "That was the last straw." She sank into a chair and accepted a brandy from Joseph. "Why did she run away? Did she tell you, Karel?"

"No, she didn't," he lied. "And I don't think you can call it running away. She paid me a visit — she even cleaned my house!"

"I wish she'd do that around here sometimes!" remarked Lida. "She could have told the maid where she was going, couldn't she? She's an intelligent child, she must have had an idea of what we would feel when we came back and found her gone!"

Joseph set his glass down, hard. "How is she now? Do you think I should go up and kiss her good night?"

"I kissed her good night," said Lida. "She lay down and turned over and fell asleep."

"Exhaustion," said Karel.

"I felt her forehead," Lida observed, "it was cool."

Karel looked at her. "There's no fever. Nothing physical."

"She's too young to have a case of nerves," Lida stated categorically.

"I wouldn't bet on that," replied Karel. "I've just told Joseph that I thought it best if he devoted some of his electioneering time to his child."

Lida sat up. "That's your medical opinion?"

"Yes, that's my medical opinion. And my opinion as Joseph's brother, and as someone who loves Petra."

"It wouldn't have anything to do with the fact that your friend Professor Stanek announced his candidacy, today?"

"He did?" Karel ruffled his hair and studied her for a moment. "Lida, I don't see how a woman of your business acumen can be so stupid outside her office. Don't you love your child?"

She stared at him with hostile eyes. "Who brought her up? You, Karel? You, Joseph? I'll take care of her. That's my job. But I refuse to have her silly notions interfere with what Joseph has to do."

"I guess it is your job." Karel got up. "I'd like to look in on her before I leave."

Petra was sleeping and sighing in her sleep. She lay curled up, her thin body looking more like a child's than ever.

CHAPTER TEN

In the struggle against brute oppression, the complexion of Freedom necessarily gains a rosy hue which pales, once oppression is removed. A closer inspection shows the gaunt head of Responsibility peering over the shoulder of Freedom. Like two who are married they constantly clash; but also they complement one another.

An investigation into the problem of Freedom, therefore, must lead us to an examination of the question of social order. This train of thought is not my discovery. It has pursued the ideological leaders of our nation for centuries, perhaps because the Czech people, cruelly suppressed for the larger part of its history, has dreamed of freedom more fervently than any other.

And I have derived a kind of consolation from the fact that many minds before me were caught in this conflict between the ideal of freedom and the necessity of responsibility. Some could not arrive at solutions; those who did, do not agree.

In the *Labyrinth of the World*, which our great educator John Amos Comenius published in 1623, I came on the following passage:

The world, ever perverse, grasping a shadow in place of the truth, imagines that liberty consists in being free, in serving no one. A Christian acts far differently: for he, after fortifying well his own heart that it may preserve its freedom in God, employs all else in ministering to the needs of his fellows.

How much more this is than the grudging, "Render unto Caesar!" For your fellow man, especially if organized in society, can be a very exacting customer. . . .

From THOMAS BENDA: *Essay on Freedom*

HERE he was in Prague, and all the arrangements had been made for him. Though he would never say it aloud, Thomas felt that the world owed him the smoothing of his road. Egon Barsiny, Doctor of Philosophy, Chief Editor and part owner of Humanita Publishers, had done just that. Dr. Barsiny had written a most flattering, most enthusiastic

letter. Miss Elinor Simpson had mentioned the Essay to him. Would Mr. Thomas Benda come to Prague, all expenses paid, to discuss the book and to sign a contract?

The whole affair was simple and beautiful, and there was the kind of money in it which Thomas needed. But once in Prague, Thomas's mood changed and his doubts returned. It was true that Humanita, before the war, had published his novel; but the men who had staffed the house then, a somewhat lackadaisical, tolerant, *bohémien* crowd with a flair for the extraordinary, were gone and dead. Dr. Barsiny was a new man, an unknown quantity; his publishing program, from the catalogue enclosed in the letter, was all-inclusive and tending to the popular, and its tone had been too aggressive for Thomas's taste.

Also, there was a question of ethics. He could well imagine Elinor's sales talk on the "Essay on Freedom." Elinor had sold Dr. Barsiny Elinor's idea of the book. Barsiny should be told the truth before he bought and paid. Only what was the truth in this case?

The train came in shortly after noon, and Thomas felt too tired to call Barsiny and see him that same day. He checked in at the Aurora Hotel, far removed from the heart of town and from the Alcron where Elinor was staying. He wanted to rest, but sleep would not come; so he went out to visit some of the coffeehouses he had frequented in pre-war Prague. They had changed. A mob of youngish, pimple-faced people with long hair filled the first one. They wore sloppy clothes, shouted terms he did not understand, and perused small printed sheets which, at first, he could not identify. A sleazy waiter offered him a table; Thomas sat down but postponed ordering. After a while, it came to him that these young people were discussing horses, and that this coffeehouse, once the haunt of the literati, had become a hangout for good-for-nothings who made their living by betting on French horse races.

He went to the next coffeehouse. No one of the theatrical clique he'd known before the war was there. Only a few tables were occupied; they seemed to have been chosen with a view to creating a no man's land between each cluster of guests. Thomas noticed that everyone examined him furtively as he came in. He sat down near the wall and reached for the day's papers which hung in light wooden holders on a hook above him. Eventually the customers, satisfied that he was not out to disturb them, resumed their whispered conversations.

Thomas, a glass of ersatz tea before him, observed them over the rim of his paper. They were men of all ages, even the older ones a little flashy in appearance, and they had endless time. Often, they would cease talking altogether, and stare into space, or jot down something on the cardboard coasters that were served with their beers. Suddenly, they would lean deep

over their table, their hands would go under it, and they would sit up again, lean back, and smile. Then one of them would get up and leave, while the other remained until new people entered and came to his table.

Thomas was so fascinated by this pattern and by the puzzle of what they might be doing, that he started when the man spoke to him. The man had been standing next to him for a while, hands in pockets, softly rocking back and forth on his rubber heels.

"Would you have a light?" asked the man.

A box of matches was stuck on the ash tray on Thomas's table, as it was on every other table in the coffeehouse. "Why, certainly!" said Thomas, struck a match, and held it up to the man.

The man sat down facing him. He pulled out a pack of American cigarettes and pushed it over to Thomas. "Help yourself!"

"Thank you!" Thomas took one and lit it with the match he had offered. The man was not smoking.

"What do you want here?" the man said calmly.

Thomas pointed at the orange-colored fluid in his glass. "The tea. . . . I want to drink my tea."

"Where are you from?"

The man's whole approach, his questions, his insolence reminded Thomas of the gangster movies he had seen in America. The waiter stood at the far end of the room, studying the empty air.

"I'm from Rodnik."

"Ah — from out of town?"

"Yes, out of town."

"Do you want to buy dollars?"

Thomas smiled. He felt a lot easier, but also disenchanted. "I'm not interested, thank you."

"Do you want to sell dollars?"

"I haven't got any."

"That's too bad." The man rose. "I could have given you a decent rate. Well, next time you come around, maybe we can do business."

"Yes," said Thomas, "next time." He called the waiter and paid for the tea, though he had not touched it, and left.

The rest of the afternoon, he walked through the streets, unmindful of the slush on the pavements. The crooked old houses, each one with its own history, the passageways leading him through ancient courtyards surprisingly from one quarter to another, failed to intrigue him. He was thinking of freedom, and of the money-changers and race-track touts who were part of that freedom, too. And the more he thought about that, the less he felt like confronting Dr. Barsiny, today, tomorrow, or the day after tomorrow.

That night he attended the concert of the Moravian Teachers' Chorus,

and had himself moved to tears by the clear, simple sound of their *a cappella* voices, by the naïveté of their songs; there was even something touching in the way these solid, elderly men with their starched white shirt fronts and their black tails opened their mouths wide and gave themselves to the spirit of their music.

He stuck to his room most of the next day, but in the evening he went to the National Theater where they were giving E. F. Burian's new opera *Marysha*. He knew of it. Burian had taken a play based on a folk theme and had set it to music, using the drama's text as his libretto.

It was always difficult for Thomas to find his way to modern music, but some of Burian's melodies emerged above the atonal and held him. What struck him as most remarkable was that the true hero of the work was an almost inarticulate man — who attained stature and whose full voice burst from him only in the last five minutes of the final act. It was an artistic surprise, and he admired Burian for having seen the operatic possibilities in the role and for having carried out musically the original conception of the character in the play.

"Thomas! Thomas Benda!"

He shrunk. The crowd in the lobby, piled around the wardrobe desks for their topcoats and wraps, still kept Elinor hidden from him; but she was pushing through. She came toward him trailed by a bevy of men in tuxedos whom she proceeded to introduce.

He was grateful for that; it eliminated having to apologize for being in Prague and not yet having called on her.

He did not catch any of the names, and only some of the titles. One of her entourage was an official of the American Embassy; the other a Czech editor; a third was a character actor in the motion picture studios on the Barrandov. It was exactly as it had been in America — Elinor and her stable; and the memory twinged, for he had been part of it.

"Of course you all have heard of my dear friend Thomas Benda," said Elinor. "Thomas, you absolutely must join us. It was mean of you not to call me, but I'll forgive you if you come with us. Wasn't the opera something? Sam here" — she pointed at the pale-blond American — "says he never heard anything quite as much like caterwauling. But he knows nothing about music, he's a diplomat, aren't you, Sam? Is Kitty with you? No? Then what are you waiting for?"

They left the theater, Elinor taking Thomas's arm. Across the quay, the Moldau River lay sluggish under a partial cover of ice; the cold air hit Thomas's forehead. He wanted to say that he preferred going back to his hotel; but knowing that this would not help him and that fate had pounced on him, he gave up.

He was awakened by the hammers that were beating at his temples. He lay on a strange sofa, in a strange room, clad in a pair of silk pajamas much too wide for him. He tried to massage his cheeks and withdrew his fingers, disgusted by the stubbles.

Slowly, the room became familiar; he recognized the chrysanthemum wallpaper and the yellow chair. A great number of ash trays stood around, filled with innumerable cigarette butts, and on a low table in the corner were half-empty bottles and used glasses.

He groaned and sat up. How had that happened? And what had happened? Nausea slowly rose from his stomach. Oh my God — the same thing all over again! As on the night train from St. Louis to Kansas City. . . .

He tried to remember. There had been a lot of talk and a lot of witticism and a lot of hot political information. All of this had been bandied about, and everybody had acted as if he were on the inside of everything. Thomas had tried to follow, but much of what was said had been allusion; he had understood only half and had become bored. And his boredom had given way to depression — all these voices, all this empty motion, books that were discarded with a few words, ideas that were ridiculed with a gesture. . . .

So he had kept on drinking.

His jacket and pants hung over a chair; his underwear, folded, lay on an end table next to it. He stood up shakily and got a whiff of his own smell; he reeked of stale liquor and perspiration. His head was popping.

He maneuvered his bare feet between the ashes on the rug to the chair and the end table. He stumbled and crashed against the chair as he tried to hold himself upright.

The door opened.

Elinor, fresh and trim, her face pink, her silver-gray hair carefully brushed, eyed him with amusement and said, "Good morning, Thomas! There's a pot of black coffee, real coffee, in my bedroom. Would you like to take a cold shower, first?"

He grabbed his jacket and held it in front of him.

"Don't be silly!" she said. "Those are my pajamas. Sam and I had to put you to bed, last night. Very able fellow, this Sam — I must mention it to the ambassador."

He dropped his jacket guiltily. "I'm terribly sorry — all the trouble I made — I don't recall a thing —"

"You were awfully cute!" she said. "I never knew you were such a happy drunk! We laughed and laughed!"

Thomas scowled.

"Then you picked a fight with Pilubnik, the poet. I don't know what it

was about, because you were fighting in Czech. After that, you began to cry, and then you passed out."

He looked at her anxiously. "That was all?"

She laughed and came over to him and tapped his arm. "Yes, darling, that was all."

He yawned. "I have my own bed in my hotel."

"I didn't want to ship you there because you'd never have gotten up on time."

"On time for what?"

"We have an appointment with Barsiny at eleven sharp."

He came to. "*We?* What appointment?"

"I phoned Barsiny last night. Somebody's got to take you in hand."

"I can handle my own business with my publisher."

"But you haven't been handling it."

His scowl became openly antagonistic.

"Barsiny made a point of my coming along," she stressed.

He was too furious and too exhausted to argue. He was trapped. "Barsiny did, huh?"

"I don't *have* to come! I'm fairly busy, you know!"

"Oh, what's the difference!" he said tiredly. At least she had taken the decision out of his hand. . . . "Where's the shower?"

"In there! Don't you remember?" she chuckled. "What a happy drunk you were!"

He could still hear her chuckling to herself as he closed the bathroom door behind him.

Barsiny received them as if he had known them for years. He treated Elinor with deference, Thomas with esteem and fatherliness. He explained how happy he was that Thomas had found his way back to Humanita, and with such an important project!

"All my life," he said, "I have been most concerned with the problem of freedom." He rubbed his short-cropped wheat-colored hair and smiled, showing tobacco-stained teeth. "You see, I was here in the country during the occupation. That's why I wouldn't like to see a repetition of anything we had to suffer then."

"I understand, Dr. Barsiny, you wrote some very clever editorials in that time!" said Elinor.

"I daresay I laid a number of cuckoo's eggs in the Nazi nest!" Barsiny grinned. "They never were able to read between the lines! But that is no way to live! We want to say what we want when we want to! Right?"

Thomas was silent. That Dr. Barsiny had been inside the country, while

he had been living in America, elevated the publisher into the hero class. Yet there was something shocking in the fact that Barsiny had been permitted to write editorials in the German-controlled papers — the man was either very shrewd or a criminal. But it was impossible for him to hold his present position without having been cleared; so he was both shrewd and a hero, and would have to be told the truth.

"Now, Mr. Benda, about your new book!" urged Barsiny.

"My outline isn't complete."

Barsiny waved grandly. "A man of your reputation is welcome with us on his say-so. But if you care to tell us something about it —"

Thomas wished that his head didn't ache. What he must tell had to be expressed clearly and concisely, but his mind seemed to buckle with all the contradictions he had uncovered in thinking about his theme. And Barsiny, in stating that he wanted to say what he wanted when he wanted to, had prejudiced the matter.

"Are you sure you're not buying a pig in a poke?" Thomas asked.

Barsiny was a little taken aback. Thomas Benda didn't appear as eager to sign a contract as Elinor Simpson had led him to believe. Several considerations went through the publisher's head: Was Thomas trying to ease out because some competitor had snapped him up? And if so, what could be done to gain him back? Or was it simply that Benda was not certain about the book and therefore hesitated to commit himself? If that was the case, he had to be propped up, and fast. We need some programmatic literature, Dolezhal had said, and my Party does not finance a publishing house merely to make an investment.

"Pig in a poke . . ." said Barsiny. "We know your work, Mr. Benda! We know your novel and the Liberator Appeals and what you wrote in America. I tell you how far we are willing to gamble on you! I have taken the liberty of discussing the plan of your 'Essay on Freedom' with my associates, and we agree that a work on this subject, written by you, is just what this country and this period need. We're going to advertise it before you've even turned over the manuscript to us. We're going to print brochures and send them to all our lists and have them distributed by all bookstores. Just give us a few hints of what you're going to say, a few sentences we can quote! We're going to treat this 'Essay on Freedom' as the most important book of the year! How do you like that?"

"I think that's magnificent!" said Elinor. "We couldn't do it any better in America!"

Thomas was impressed. The most important book of the year! His name before the eyes of every literate person in the country! Thomas Benda, the Spokesman . . .

"But I don't see . . ." He hesitated. *A few sentences we can quote —*

how could the things which he had to say be said in a few sentences?

"All right, you have no outline," Barsiny broke into his thoughts, "but you can make a short statement for us to work with! By the time we're through with our advance campaign, I promise you a minimum sale of fifty thousand copies!"

"It's not so simple!" pleaded Thomas. "I like freedom. You like freedom. All of us like freedom. We want a society in which everybody is guaranteed all the freedom he likes."

"That's it! That's it!" cried Barsiny. "Let me take that down!" He wrote furiously on a pad: ". . . in which everybody is guaranteed all the freedom he likes. . . ."

"It can't be done this way! How can I explain it to you — it's complicated, and I don't know yet —"

"Thomas!" said Elinor, "freedom is freedom, and you've experienced what it feels like to have it taken away!"

"Wonderful!" said Barsiny. "D'you mind if I add this?" His pencil was flying again. ". . . I've experienced what it feels like to have it taken away. . . ." He waved the pencil, "Don't worry, Mr. Benda, we'll edit it later."

Thomas blinked. The publisher's energy took his breath away, and he struggled to speak. "But listen, Dr. Barsiny — permit me to bring up just one question —"

"Anything! Anything!" Barsiny sat back and laid his freckled hands flat against one another. "A book of this kind needs discussion!"

"Let us suppose," Thomas began, trying to marshal at least one of his doubts, "let us suppose that this guaranteed freedom endangers, at a certain point, the structure of society — and I don't care which kind of society. Does not that give society the right to restrict freedom?"

"We've always had police," grumbled Elinor. "You can't let thieves and gangsters and murderers roam around free. That's understood."

Thomas's expression was pained. "I didn't refer to that. The question is: At what point can society claim it is endangered? And how far can it be permitted, in self-defense, to curb freedom?"

"Aren't you getting a little off the road?" Barsiny asked quizzically.

Thomas rubbed his forehead. "I'll have to go off the road, Dr. Barsiny. That will be the whole value of my book!"

"Naturally," agreed Barsiny. "We would want you to do that. A Thomas Benda will have to do more than rehash old phrases."

The agreement came too easily. But Thomas went on, "I asked whether society could be permitted to curb freedom. But society doesn't ask that question. It just goes ahead and does it. Do we then fight society?"

"Yes, of course! We fought the Nazis, didn't we?" said Barsiny.

"If we had curbed the freedom of the Sudeten-Germans in time, as we should be eradicating them now, we might not have had to fight the Nazis."

"Yes," said Barsiny, without enthusiasm. The resentment which any editor and publisher has against authors began to well up in him. Did they have to enjoy their intellectual stomach-aches so noisily? All he wanted was an advance statement that he could use for his promotion work, and that he could hand over to Dolezhal for the election campaign.

Thomas, who believed that Barsiny was beginning to share his apprehensions, continued digging, "In other words, we must ask two questions: Whose freedom should be curbed, if necessary?" He saw Elinor's frown. It egged him on. "And whose society, what kind of society, is entitled to protect itself at the cost of curbing freedom?"

"Do *you* have the answers?" asked Barsiny.

"Not yet," said Thomas.

"Do you think you can find valid answers?"

"I wish I knew. . . ." Thomas leaned forward, eagerly, "When I have those answers, don't you see, I'll have the book."

"But it's as plain as daylight!" clamored Elinor. "Thomas, you've lived in the United States! What is it we say in America? *The less government we have, the better!* Not bad, from old Emerson. . . . Just reword it: That society is best which grants the most freedom!"

"And if that society should be threatened and, in order to protect itself, should have to cut down on freedom — does it cease to be the best of societies? According to your theory, it does. Now: if the restrictions it has to impose mean that it no longer is a good society, then it cannot be permitted to curb freedom, and must be changed one way or the other. . . . Do you see the vicious circle in which you're caught, Elinor? No — the criterion lies somewhere else. Only what is the criterion? Who determines it?"

"Most fascinating," said Barsiny. He wondered how much Elinor Simpson really knew about this book of Thomas's, and with his sense for cuckoo's eggs he felt that the work would need close supervision. "I like your spirit of objectivity, Mr. Benda. However, we must be practical. Right now, in Czechoslovakia, the threat to freedom does not come from society, nor from government, but from certain forces within both who would like to arrogate to themselves powers and controls detrimental to everybody else —" He shut up under the take-it-easy glance Elinor had shot him.

Thomas dismissed Barsiny's attempt to give him a line of policy. "You're not stating anything new!" he said. "That's been true throughout history."

"But you *will* take it into account —" Barsiny pressed.

"I'm taking everything into account. But what I, for my part, would like to know is . . ."

Then he stopped. His eyes went past Dr. Barsiny's short-cropped, round

skull to the wall, to the books that lined it, and back to Elinor. He had done all that could be expected of him. He had tried to tell Barsiny that the Essay had its pitfalls and that it was not a mere matter of Yes, Yes, No, No, with nothing in between.

"What would you like to know?" Barsiny asked helpfully.

"Will you publish the book even if it should not fit into any of the accepted grooves? If its conclusions should be attacked from every conceivable side?"

There was a short interplay, too subtle to be noticed by any but the two between whom it took place — a raising of the brows by Barsiny, a faint nod from Elinor. Then Barsiny said, "Of course we will, Mr. Benda. The kind of freedom we pride ourselves on consists precisely in our ability and willingness to publish even the lonely voice, the out-of-the-way, the critique of the accepted. And this is the kind of freedom you're going to endorse, too, I'm sure. So your Essay won't be as difficult as all that!"

Barsiny picked up the phone. "The contract for Mr. Benda, please!" And, replacing the receiver, he smilingly turned back to Thomas, "Let us proceed with your statement."

Thomas's headache, forgotten in the heat of explaining himself, was back in full force. The thing was settled, and the fight was gone out of him, and he thought dully that one step now must follow the other. Besides, Dr. Barsiny was right — the freedom that permitted an author like himself to have the Essay published was the paramount freedom, the freedom of all freedoms, which must be maintained under any circumstances.

"I like freedom. You like freedom. All of us like freedom," he heard the publisher's somewhat fatty voice. "We want a society in which everybody is guaranteed all the freedom he likes. I have experienced what it feels like to have it taken away. . . ."

Barsiny looked up, expectantly.

"So have millions of my people," dictated Thomas, and broke off. "Do I have to go on? Do we have to do this?"

"It is necessary," said Barsiny.

Thomas became conscious of the change in Elinor's face. She reminded him of a missionary — the same fervor, the same intolerance.

"Now that we have it," he said, turning back quickly to the publisher's freckled hand which was moving along the page of the pad, "we are in danger of taking freedom for granted. We must never stop thinking of it, we must guard it, defend it. . . ."

He paused to consider. Until now, there was nothing in what he had said to which he couldn't fully subscribe. He began to feel better, his words began to carry him, it was almost as if he were back in the days when the Nazis stood at the border and when he was outlining to Joseph the impas-

sioned leaflets that subsequently went out as the *Liberator Appeals*. Disregarding Elinor, he slipped into Czech.

"The peril to freedom lies in ourselves, in human complacency, in the willingness to accept someone else's word without ever-renewed examination."

He rested his foot on the rung of the chair and leaned his elbow on his knee. "Freedom is truth, the search for truth, the fearless proclamation of truth. Only the truth makes us free, Jan Hus has taught us, and ever since, the Czech people have fought and bled and died for this lesson."

He saw the publisher's cool, clever eyes grow wistful; Elinor's eyes were on him, she was wetting her lips. "What is it you're saying?" she asked tensely. "Tell me!"

Barsiny translated. He was good at it; the words lost none of their strength.

Thomas stood up. Flattening his hands on the publisher's desk, he pronounced sharply, "And now we're a mature nation, tested and hardened in fire. We will — we will . . ."

The spirit left him. He felt as if something in him were collapsing.

"What's he saying? What's he saying?" demanded Elinor.

Again, Barsiny translated, up to the point where Thomas's voice had petered out.

"Go on, Thomas!" she dunned. "You're great!"

"Words, such a pile of words," he said.

"We will —" repeated Barsiny. "Please, Mr. Benda!"

Thomas fended him off. "You finish it. I can't."

"We will fight," said Elinor, "as we fought the Germans, anyone who threatens our national or individual freedom."

Barsiny, who had taken down the line, looked questioningly at Thomas. Thomas nodded dispiritedly. He was beginning to realize what he had done. He had written a declaration of war. But in whose name? And against whom?

Barsiny was closing his pad, slapping the cover down. He greeted a girl who had entered quietly, and took the sheaf of papers she handed him. Then he pulled a thick, green fountain pen out of his pocket, unscrewed it methodically, and held it out to Thomas.

"Your contract, Mr. Benda!"

Thomas signed.

No, it was nothing like a declaration of war. It was an advertising blurb, full of hackneyed sentiments and melodramatic slogans, and Barsiny could have done better by himself, except that the publisher was too polite to say so. And in any case, what did it amount to? thought Thomas. What he would write in his book was the essential item. No compromise there;

but utter honesty with himself and with the issue, no matter what his conclusions would be, no matter whom and how many people he would antagonize, no matter whose illusions, his own included, he would have to destroy.

Elinor embraced him and kissed him, and Barsiny shook his hand and congratulated him. It was an effort to bear up under that.

Well, they wouldn't be able to say he hadn't warned them.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

AND NOW WE'RE A MATURE NATION — Joseph read — *tested and hardened in fire. We will fight, as we fought the Germans, anyone who threatens our national and individual freedom.*

He placed the newspaper from the district town of Limberk flat on his desk, snapped open his penknife, and cut out of the front page Thomas's prominently displayed statement. It was a masterpiece, a real little gem. It breathed spirit and forcefulness; the rhythm of its words was as unmistakable as had been that of the Liberator Appeals; its authorship would have been clear even if Thomas's name had not been printed in block letters at its head; it was general enough to find favor with practically everybody; and yet it cannily gave support to one side in the contest — his side.

He pushed back his office chair and, whistling to himself, stepped lightly to the wall cabinet which held his supplies of stationery. Out of the second drawer, he took a large Manila sheet of the size that fitted into his volume of Thomas's collected works; out of the third, he fished a small bottle of good and rare rubber cement. Back at his desk, he pasted the clipping on its backing and smoothed it down with the heel of his hand and the fleshy part of his thumb.

It really was amazing that Thomas could have been made to declare himself; it confirmed the fact that Thomas had not forgotten the ideals taught him in his formative years; and it proved, thought Joseph, that if he was unable to devote himself to Thomas for the time being, Elinor was a perfect substitute. People who knew what they wanted, combined with a publisher's contract, made for a persuasive force that was hard to beat.

Also, it was a lesson in practical politics. In truth, Joseph had done very little. He had mentioned the matter casually, and only once, in a letter to Dolezhal; but this had been enough. What was power? It was having

at your disposal a large but finely spun web, so that if you pulled a string at one end, another string at another end of the web began to tremble.

The idea intrigued him. There was more to being elected than just getting back the Benda Works. He would have a close look at this web and learn where to twang at the strings and what effects to produce. There must be a tremendous satisfaction in sitting somewhere and exercising a long-distance control over other people who didn't even know that they were being controlled.

"Yes?" he said in annoyance over the unannounced entrance of his pale, mousy secretary. That was another thing, too — in Prague, he would get himself a secretary who had shape in front and in back, who wore lipstick and plucked her eyebrows and had her hair permanented.

"Frantishek Kravat wants to see you," the girl said, her colorless eyes frightened.

"About what?"

"I'm sorry," she said unhappily. "He didn't tell me."

Joseph grimaced. "I wish you wouldn't make a tragedy out of everything. You only work here. It's not your life!" Then it struck him that for a person of her kind the work in his office was her life. He gave her an affable smile.

The smile, because she was so unaccustomed to it, made the girl even more timid.

"Come here," he said.

She approached the desk awkwardly.

"You know what I'm going to do?"

"No, Mr. Benda," she whispered.

"I'm going to tell Kravat to fix it with the Works Council so that I can pay you a raise. You've been a very conscientious worker, and I like to see people around me happy."

"Oh, Mr. Benda!"

"Don't thank me! And for God's sake, don't cry! You haven't gotten it yet! . . . And now, call in Kravat."

Kravat came in and stood silently while Joseph marked on the Manila sheet the date of publication and the name of the paper in which Thomas's statement was printed.

"Sit down, won't you?" invited Joseph, "I'll be through in a second." Without looking directly at him, he had tried to get a glimpse of Kravat — Kravat's expression might tell him something of what the man was up to.

Obviously, Kravat had seen the newspaper before and recognized the big type on the statement Joseph had pasted up. Was there some connection between the appearance of the statement and Kravat's visit? Kravat

was a man with an eye for where people were heading; was he feeling that people were heading a certain way, and that Thomas's statement was helping to consolidate the direction? Was he reconsidering so as to be able to climb on the bandwagon?

Joseph threw the newspaper into the wastebasket but kept the clipping on top of his desk.

"Well, Kravat!" he said cheerily. "What brings you here?"

"This!" Kravat said, pointing at the exhibit.

"Ah, this! You know, I half expected you." Joseph stretched comfortably and nodded toward the crystal cigarette box on his desk. "Take one! Take a couple!"

Humorous wrinkles showed at the corners of Kravat's eyes. He thanked Joseph and dug out a fistful of cigarettes, lighting one, and shoving the others into his pocket. "They're expensive, these days," he remarked.

"Quite," said Joseph. He had not meant Kravat to help himself that liberally.

"Mr. Benda — did you have anything to do with the publication of that statement?" asked Kravat, and blew a thin stream of smoke through pursed lips.

"As a matter of fact I didn't. But why do you want to know?"

Kravat pondered that information. "Well — everybody will think you did, because everybody knows that you're Thomas's brother and that you're a candidate for election."

"What of it? It's a pretty good statement!"

Kravat again released smoke. "Yes. Except that it's not complete."

Joseph glanced at the clipping. *Freedom is truth, the search for truth, the fearless proclamation of truth.* "I'm afraid I can't see that, Kravat."

"With your kind permission, Mr. Benda — your brother says nowhere about whose freedom he is talking."

Joseph laid his large hands in front of him, like a challenge to Kravat. "Freedom, my friend, is for everybody! That's what I stand for, and I think, at the bottom of your heart, you do, too."

The trouble was that Joseph was partially right. But not everybody could be trusted with the use of freedom. "I have a proposition," Kravat said heavily.

"You have?" Joseph's voice was hopeful, but he lowered it instantly. "That resident manager's job in Martinice is still open!"

Kravat made a wry face. "No," he said; "it's about that statement your brother wrote. We want a discussion on it. A public discussion. You, Mr. Benda, against our candidate, Professor Stanek."

Since Joseph was still too perplexed to answer, Kravat went on, "Make it a large meeting. Invite everybody in town."

"If you want a public discussion," snapped Joseph, "have it with my brother. I told you I had nothing to do with the publication of that thing."

"But you're the candidate, not Thomas."

Joseph glared at Kravat; Kravat looked noncommittal.

"Who had that brilliant idea?"

"Several people," admitted Kravat. "I among them."

"I'm not a clown. I'm not a performer. This is a political campaign, not a circus."

"Oh yes," said Kravat, shoving the tiny stub of his cigarette into one of his cheap holders; "but it would make a bad impression if we called the meeting and you didn't show up. . . ."

There would be a great pleasure, thought Joseph, in having the power to put certain people in jail, and in hearing the jail door clang shut, and in knowing that those people would be muzzled for a while.

"Of course I'll show up!" he said evenly. "And so that you know you won't have it all your own way, I'll bring some of my friends along, too!"

Krvat stamped out the sorry end of his cigarette. "Fair enough," he said. "After all, we've got a democracy so we can talk about these things."

"Yes — that's what it is for, isn't it?" said Joseph, and shoved the stiff sheet with the clipping into his desk.

He did his work as always. He commuted between Řodník and Martinice; he compiled cost sheets and revised prices and tried to cut corners; he met with committees and cast his vote, sometimes on the majority, sometimes on the minority side; he ate and he slept and on Sundays, he took Petra walking.

But inside him was unrest, and the unrest grew as the weeks passed, as the snow melted and the Suska River flooded its banks, as the crocuses showed their delicate cups above the ground and the sap rose in the pines, as the meeting day approached. Despite his commitment to Kravat, he had called up Prague and inquired from Dolezhal what the Minister would think if he were to crawl out from under. Dolezhal had laughed. "My dear boy, words are a political weapon just as much as money, or influence, or organization. Learn to use them! Do you believe I could get out of a debate in Parliament? But remember, words are the most pliable of weapons, and that all is fair in this kind of fight." That's what Dolezhal had said, and it had left Joseph straddling the old predicament.

Then he had wanted to see Thomas, ostensibly to get some additional ideas on the statement; in reality, to try to ring his brother in on the performance. Let Thomas speak on the abstract, idealistic end of the thing; he, himself, would tackle its practical implications; and with the high regard in which the people of his country held an author, even if they did

not understand him, they would listen and get bored, and the whole disputation would end up hanging in the air.

But the moment Joseph mentioned the statement, Thomas refused to see him; apparently, it was as sore a subject with Thomas as with himself.

Joseph made vain attempts to surmise what Stanek would say. He knew Stanek; he had worked with him, too, in the crammed, event-filled months between Munich and the conquest of Czechoslovakia; he could visualize the Professor mounting the platform—truly, no formidable opponent! Of course, the old man had a sharp tongue and a sharp wit; but against that, he could set his dignity and his achievements. Considered soberly, Stanek, an intellectual, was less a man of the people than himself, with a grandfather who had started out as a peasant, and a father who began as a small manufacturer with a style of living not so different from that of any other citizen of Rodnik. He had his roots with the people; Stanek, in books.

No, he did not dread Stanek, and he did not fear what Stanek might say. What he was afraid of was a weakness in his own position.

Yet he was no impostor! He had the right principles and he had the right answers! He was for freedom for everybody, including himself, including the freedom to own his own business. He was for the widest social legislation, for helping the workmen when they became sick or old or unemployed; and if he was elected, he personally would push a law to pay for the retraining of men like Blaha who had been incapacitated through their work. He was for the greatest benefit to the greatest number of people, so long as no one was unduly hurt in providing it. He was against anyone telling anybody else what to do and what to say and what to think and how much to earn.

That was his program. That was the program of the Party in whose ranks he stood, Dolezhal's Party, and there could be no doubt that it was a just and equitable program.

Then why was he afraid? Why did he protest so much? Why didn't he sail into the meeting on the strength of his confidence in his Party, his program, himself, and in his ability to carry his audience?

He started afresh. To anyone else, he might pretend that he was primarily interested in the nation, the people, democracy, welfare, social progress—and he was, yes!—but deep inside he knew that Joseph Benda, first of all, stood for Joseph Benda. This was his weak point. He was in mortal fear that somebody, a Stanek, might find it out or guess at it intuitively and put his finger on him and say so.

He cast about for defenses. This program of his, the ideals of democracy—were they not exactly the ideals for which he had fought before the war, and in the days of Munich, and during the war? He had had no

doubts then, no hesitations, no fears; and no voice outside or inside of him had nagged him with superfluous, harassing questions. Even the lost members of his squadron, those whose bodies were salvaged and those of whom nothing had remained to be buried—he had mourned them, but never, never had it entered his mind that they could have died for anything but the purest and best of causes. Could it be possible that at that time, too, Joseph Benda had fought only for Joseph Benda, that the liberation of his country had meant to him the liberation of the Benda Works, and that the abject misery of his people had been identical with his inability to make glass at a profit of 6 per cent and over? What was he—a monster?

When Joseph thought that far—and mostly, this thought occurred to him at night—he could no longer sleep, he turned and tossed in his bed, his pillow grew hot, and he did not dare to punch it and smooth it for fear of waking Lida.

All right, then, let it be true. But weren't the others exactly like him? If he wanted to hold on to his own, weren't they out to grab it from him? And hadn't they grabbed it already—the Novaks, the Kravats, the Works Councils, the unions, the nationalizers? Hadn't they taken away his Works and reduced him to a puppet dangling from their wires? They, too, pretended; they, too, used his slogans—but in reality, they wanted to enrich themselves and they were enriching themselves, sometimes as individuals, always as a class.

If anyone needed to be exposed, it was these demagogues. Unfortunately, the class they represented was in the majority; if he exposed them, he would only help to drive the mass of innocents into their arms. But in no case were their moral rights any better than his.

And now, on top of all that, they challenged him and forced him to defend himself—in front of his own workers, on his own home grounds, in the town whose leading citizen he still was. If democracy meant that a man could be cornered by people his inferior, and be driven into cheapening himself before people his inferior—then democracy was a sham. Kravat and Stanek and Novak had made a sham of it, because they were using its forms for their own aims. Well, he could do the same.

Go to the people! . . . Was it possible that a public contest of hypocrisy between him and old Stanek could ever prove the value of a program or a party or a man? It was absurd!

What the country needed was a government of men who knew what was best for it, who by their education, training, experience, and broad-mindedness were pre-eminently capable of discharging their responsibilities, who were experts in their fields and in the art of taking and holding power. And the sooner such a government was established, the sooner

the country returned to sanity and did away with the excesses of democracy, the sooner the sham game was brushed off the table, the better it would be for everybody, even for those poor glassworkers who would come to the meeting to have their ears shoveled full of double talk!

When he had reached this final conclusion, Joseph would begin to feel happier. It occurred to him, once or twice, that what he dreamed of was a kind of dictatorship — but it was a benevolent one, and, after all, whatever name you gave to the outward forms, when had there been a time in history at which the people did not have to be led by their betters?

When Thomas and Kitty arrived at the Rodnik Municipal Auditorium, the hall was already quite crowded. Outside, a drizzle was falling. Inside, the damp clothing of the people was steaming in the warmth of their bodies. The auditorium was a bleak affair with a beamed ceiling and a wooden stage where the traveling theater troupes performed when they came to town and where, twice a week, the movie screen was set up; along one wall were placed the ladders and ropes and bars and other paraphernalia of the local *Sokol* which used the hall on the remaining evenings as a gymnasium.

Thomas looked at the proscenium. The organizers of the meeting had tried to relieve the gloom of the hall by means of bunting and flags and slogans painted on streamers; but since the slogans had to be impartial, they lacked punch, and the dim lights made the bunting drab instead of gay. The shrill shouting of the many children tumbling between the rows of seats gave Thomas the feeling that he was caged in a zoo. He tried to distinguish words and sentences in the drone of voices — all these dreary people had come from their dreary homes to hear about freedom and about the statement he had written. He saw Lida already entrenched in the front row, with Petra, head bent, fidgeting with self-consciousness, at her side.

"Do you want to sit up there?" Kitty asked.

"I'm not looking for the limelight, tonight."

"But we should say hello —"

"It will hold," Thomas assured her and led her to the rear of the hall where people were standing before a long table on which soup dishes and boxes filled with spoons were stacked.

A little man was going from one person to the other and spreading the word that Joseph Benda was contributing the food for the evening.

"Goulash soup!" he explained. "And thick! No skimping with Joseph Benda!"

"Well, he's got it, hasn't he?" remarked someone. and a deep-throated voice inquired pointedly, "Yes, but what about beer?"

The little man got excited and said that this was a serious meeting about questions of state, and that drunks and burns should keep out of it.

"You would sell your vote for a glass of beer!" accused a woman, and the deep-throated voice came back, "What do you mean — my vote? My soul!"

"Of all the godlessness!" an old man said reedily. "In my time we paid for food, and were grateful we got it!"

"Listen, Daddy — those times are over! Now a man is a man, and they'll give us goulash soup and a lot of other things, too. That's the Revolution —"

"But it's nice of Mr. Benda, nevertheless, to treat us to goulash soup! What do the Communists give us? Leaflets!"

The little man, who had gone away, returned waving his hands. "There will be beer, too!"

As if to confirm the announcement, four heavy-set fellows came in, dragging big baskets.

"See?" shouted the little man. "The glasses!"

"It'll be thin beer," somebody predicted. "Thin and cheap."

"No, no, no!" cried the little man. "The very best!"

"Buttering us up — that's what it is! Pretty raw, I say!"

"What do you care as long as you stuff your belly and pour it down your guzzle?"

"He means well! Joseph Benda's always had a heart for the workingman!"

Thomas could see that Kitty was enjoying the rumpus. And there was something wholesome in this skepticism and this interest in food and drink; a people that could weigh the merits of a goulash soup and be concerned about the grade of beer was unlikely to get drunk on slogans, including the ones Barsiny and Elinor had pulled out of him.

Up front, seats were being clapped down, people were calling for quiet, children were caught by the scruff of the neck and clamped in tight between their elders. The Reverend Antonin Trnka, pastor of the Rodnik church, appeared on the stage.

The Reverend was nervously stroking the lapels of his black coat. He had agreed to chair the meeting because he had been told that everybody believed in his political neutrality and because, as a man of God, he was likely to be respected even during the heat of argument. . . . He was not so sure. It was true that he had few opinions and rarely expressed those he had; but the crammed, squirming humanity inside the auditorium was different from the sober, orderly men and women under the somber roof of his church, and it filled him with apprehension.

Thomas found seats for Kitty and himself somewhere in the middle of the hall, next to a couple of hefty women. He noticed that the Reverend

was bowing to him, and he returned the greeting. Poor Trnka, who never saw him in church! He really should make it a point to attend services some Sunday!

He noticed Kravat going by in a group of men, who distributed themselves to apparently strategic spots throughout the hall. He became anxious. If Kravat was placing a plaque, what was going to happen to the play of ideas?

Jovial shouts traveled down the aisle: "How are you, Doctor?" "Hello, Doctor!" "Good evening, Doctor!"

A quick move of Kitty's head, a half-suppressed, "There's Karel!"

For a moment, Thomas glanced at Kitty. There was on her face nothing but an expression of quiet welcome such as she might show to any relative or friend.

The people were bantering, "Have you taken the speakers' blood pressure, Doctor?" and "When are *you* going to be a candidate?"

"Popular, isn't he?" said Thomas contemptuously and, at the same time, a little enviously. Karel was nodding and waving in acknowledgment of the sallies; then he discovered Thomas and Kitty, and stopped. Thomas suddenly wanted to be with Karel, to have him near, to be protected by him when his statement would be hacked at, to tell him in so many words that it wasn't his statement at all.

"Why don't you sit here, Karel!" he called, and gestured to the two hefty women to move over. Dutifully, they shoved; the whole row of people came into motion, buckled, straightened out again,—and then there was a seat for Karel next to Kitty.

"Thanks!" said Karel, inching through to the seat. He smiled at Kitty and inquired how she was; then he sat down, carefully folding his topcoat and placing it on his lap so that his hands were busied holding it. "Looks like quite a show—" he remarked.

Kitty's face had grown livelier. She caught her gloves and pocketbook just before they fell to the floor. "Very exciting," she said, "the whole thing. And when I think of Joseph. . . ."

"You're probably more excited than he is," Thomas corrected her. "When it comes to business, he's cold as a pike, and just as sharp."

"This isn't business," said Kitty.

"To him it is!" Thomas insisted. "How did you like my statement, Karel?"

"It certainly filled the hall."

"But you didn't like it?" Thomas took Kitty's gloves and slapped them irritably against his palm.

Karel leaned forward to answer. Kitty was rearranging her gray beret. How can that little hat, he thought, hold down that tumble of curls?

"Thomas, your statement was very good," he said slowly, "but for another time."

"What time?"

"When the Nazis were here. . . ."

"It is possible that what I write is old hat to you," Thomas said sarcastically.

"It's not that. Before the liberation, such a general appeal was tremendously effective. Today, that kind of thing can be misused."

Thomas's lips set hard. "Well — if you approach it with ill will!"

"Look, Thomas — you asked me what I thought, and I told you. You can't rush into print with a lot of fighting words and expect to get only cotton-balls thrown back at you."

"Please, Karel!" said Kitty.

"Let him be specific!" Thomas demanded. "What's wrong with my statement?"

Karel hesitated. "I can't tell you exactly," he began. "But the very fact that it's open to debate —"

"Everything is open to debate!" Thomas became supercilious. "We might even learn something here."

Kitty took her gloves away from Thomas. "You're ruining them!" she said lightly.

"Ladies and gentlemen . . ." called the Reverend Trnka.

From the wings, the two disputants had come on the stage, Stanek first, moving with small, rapid steps to the chair on Trnka's right. Joseph paused halfway on the stage, looked over his audience, and bowed to Lida and Petra in the front row. Then he went forward and eased himself into the seat at Trnka's left.

People were craning their necks, and in the rear of the hall they were standing up to get a good view of the men on the stage.

Trnka was shouting again. "Ladies and gentlemen! Quiet, please! Order, please! If you can't control the children, please take them out!"

Thomas heard the heads of several recalcitrant youngsters being slapped. The people in the rear sat down, and there was a hush of a kind.

The Reverend Trnka's voice was now well-modulated. He stated the purpose of the meeting, told how it had come about, and praised it as proof of a living democracy. "To be absolutely impartial," he announced, "I suggested that the speakers draw lots to decide who was to speak first. This was done, and fate smiled on Mr. Joseph Benda. I don't think I have to introduce him. Every man, woman, and child of Rodník knows him as a provider, a fighter for freedom and the rights of the people, and as a public-spirited citizen able to set the common weal over private interests —"

He broke off. There was only thin applause, and the Reverend feared that he might have gone too far.

He folded his hands as if before prayer, and concluded, "I did not have the pleasure of baptizing him, my late and lamented predecessor having performed this joyful duty. But I have confirmed him and married him to his charming and loyal wife, I have baptized his child, and I have seen him leave into exile and have welcomed him back home.

"Ladies and gentlemen: Regardless of where we may stand in the always distorting struggle of politics—our friend—Mr. Joseph Benda!"

The applause came stronger now, particularly from some sections of the audience. Thomas snorted—if Kravat had organized a clique for Stanek, Joseph had taken good care that he, too, had support from the floor.

Joseph rose and shook the Reverend Trnka's hand. He glanced at Stanek who sat staring ahead and fingering his stringy tie. Then he faced the audience full, cleared his throat, waited for absolute silence, and began.

Only during the very first few minutes was there any trace of wavering or timidity; Joseph's voice steadily gained in vitality and firmness, and he soon succeeded in establishing between himself and the audience that current which runs from mind to mind and without which the most beautifully chosen words would fall dead.

It was a new Joseph to Thomas. Up there on the stage, with the light centered on him, he was dignified, he was powerful. His words were simple, and he repeated some of his ideas several times; but this, too, seemed design rather than uncertainty.

He played a number of variations on the theme that freedom was inextricably tied to the unity of the people. Clever, thought Thomas; if Joseph was able to create and sufficiently deepen the impression that the people were all one, that no rifts to speak of went through the body politic, then the simpletons on the floor would conclude that they could vote for him even though they were poor and he was rich.

"What brought us victory in war?" demanded Joseph. "Unity! The unity expressed in our National Front Government in which all democratic parties are represented! The unity which guarantees that meetings like this can be held in freedom, that different opinions can be stated, and that you people can be free to make up your own minds. Do you want this unity? Do you want this freedom?"

He paused dramatically, his arms outstretched.

"Yes! Yes!" shouted the clique, and the shout was taken up by the audience, and people rose and applauded wildly. Thomas joined in, because he liked this kind of unity, and because he liked this kind of freedom; but he broke off and fell silent when he noticed that Karel was sitting tight, his hands motionless under his coat.

With a short, authoritative gesture, Joseph cut off the acclaim.

"But there are forces in this country," he said, his voice dark with foreboding, "which try to break up this unity in order to make political hay out of strife and class warfare."

He paused again. Thomas sensed that Joseph was skillfully heightening the expectation of an exposé.

But Joseph switched the subject.

"You will hear it said that I am nothing but a capitalist — despite the fact that I have given up the Benda Works which my grandfather founded and my father built up, and which have given bread to many of you for generations."

Thomas cleared his throat, nervously. Joseph was telling the truth, but only part of it.

". . . A dirty capitalist despite the fact that I am no more than the Administrator in the people's name of the people's property."

"Shame!" shouted someone, and Thomas felt the almost physical impact of an audience being swayed.

"Yes — I was a capitalist! How can I deny it? But there are capitalists and capitalists. . . ." And the sly smile of all the Bendas who had been peasants spread over Joseph's face. "There were those who sided with the Nazis — to the devil with them!"

"Bravo! Bravo!"

"I claim that it is possible — and necessary! — to be a Czech first, and a worker, or farmer, or carpenter, or doctor, or schoolteacher, or capitalist, second! I fought the Nazis! It would have been unseemly for me to wear my uniform and my ribbons tonight, unless my learned opponent wore the stripes of the concentration camp prisoner — and I'm sure he has not kept these. . . ."

Thomas squirmed. It was too much. But the audience was eating it up and waiting tensely for Joseph to go on.

"I fought on the side of the people, for freedom! The freedom from foreign oppression, the freedom of you workers to organize and to make progress in all fields and to live a full and happy life. If you will forgive me, I would like to quote my famous brother, Thomas Benda, who, I'm glad to say, is among us tonight . . ."

Thomas reached for Kitty's arm. He tried to make himself small. He was thankful they weren't seated up front.

"Because my brother, during the war, was the Spokesman of our people and our hopes, and because he can put into words so much better than I what is in the hearts of all of us. *We want a society in which everybody is guaranteed all the freedom he likes.* That's what I'm for! I challenge anyone to stand up and say that he is against this!"

Abruptly, he turned and sat down. The audience, agasp for a moment, suddenly realized that this was it, that Joseph had finished, and had thrown down the gauntlet. They were on their feet, filling the auditorium with the din of their approval. People pressed over toward Thomas, trying to reach him and shake his hand; before Kitty could think of what she should do, she and Karel were pushed aside; the children, making the most of the bedlam, broke loose and got between the legs of the grownups.

The Reverend Trnka, knocking his ring finger against an empty water glass, attempted to restore some semblance of order. Stanek got up and sat down again and then stood up once more and remained standing, holding his pince-nez between thumb and forefinger of his left hand and blinking at the audience. Thomas could hardly understand the introduction the Reverend Trnka gave to the Professor.

The introduction over, Stanek had no choice but to begin speaking, although Trnka still had not stemmed the unrest in the hall. Kravat's men succeeded in enforcing some quiet.

To Thomas, the small, wispy man, with his thin white hair, who struggled to be heard was not at all ridiculous or pathetic; neither was his voice which sometimes rose to a high pitch and broke, nor the nervous gesturing with his pince-nez, nor the pushing back of the stiffly starched cuffs of his shirt. The lines on Stanek's face had been drawn by the workings of his mind; he was not a man to hammer or repeat, and he shied away from the commonplace. The whole picture, as Thomas saw it, was that of a person with an idea world of his own, of an impractical man, perhaps, but also of one without the constant drive to apply his ideas immediately and under all circumstances and for his personal advantage.

The Professor gradually gained the attention of his listeners despite his uneven voice, his fuzzy movements, and his refusal to oversimplify the issues or to appeal to the emotions of the audience. He did not make a political speech, he gave a lecture covering the general situation of the country, its economy, its internal problems.

"Unity," he said, "yes! But can we permit those who would like to deprive us of what we achieved through so much bitter work, so much sacrifice, so much blood, to hide behind the cloak of unity — or of freedom?"

The people were silent; they were thinking, pondering the question. Thomas didn't dare to look at Karel.

The Professor lectured on. What was basic? he asked. What affected everyone's life most deeply? It was the problem of who controlled the machines, and the furnaces, and the sources of raw material, and the financial institutions — and for whose benefit they were controlled. Now, by the Decrees of the President, the people had begun to control much of that; but a large share was remaining in private hands. It was to be

hoped that the two sectors of economy could work together, under a plan which was necessary to raise everybody's standard of living and to avoid economic anarchy—but human nature being what it was, the people had to be prepared for a struggle in which the lines would be drawn clearly: On the one side, the masses of workers and small farmers and mechanics; on the other, the remnants of the bourgeoisie and their hangers-on.

It was a disquieting speech to the majority of men and women in the hall. They had gone through the war, through the occupation, through the Revolution not yet a year old, and even if they did not say it, they felt they had earned a few years of peace and rest and quiet. Yet here was this old man with his nagging voice and his silly tie and old-fashioned collar, who told them that in all probability there would be no peace and that they would have to stand ready to defend once more the little they had gained and the little they wanted. They still were listening to him, but they wished he were not putting these things into words, and they wished they could forget about them.

It was disquieting to Thomas, too, because Stanek, like himself, was working in the medium of ideas. But with a difference, he thought; I build on top of other ideas, Stanek bases himself on such disagreeably tangible items as means of production, control of banks and furnaces, supply of raw materials, planned housing, planned everything.

"Which brings me to the question of freedom!" Stanek waved his pince-nez through the air. "The freedom on which my opponent was harping. Freedom for whom? Freedom for those who want to shove us back to the years of the First Republic when wages were not enough to feed the children, when the unemployed were standing in line for a handout, when strikes had to be called for even the most modest demands? Freedom to lead us into another Munich? Freedom to take away from us the mines and the steel mills and the glass factories?"

He patted his cuffs back into place and rubbed the inflamed saddle of his nose.

"Frankly, ladies and gentlemen, I am against granting such freedoms. . . ." His tone was serene and dispassionate, almost as if he were reading from a textbook. "It is my considered opinion that we should muzzle the dogs of reaction and chain the hands of those who would take our bread from our mouths—"

A loud rattling interrupted him. It came from the back of the hall; metal screeched over metal. Somebody cursed and complained angrily, "Why did you have to pour it over my pants?"

A man laughed. "Bread? Who's talking of bread? This is goulash soup!"

Everyone turned. On the long table in the rear steamed three giant kettles, permeating the close air with the pungent, spicy, meaty smell of the hot soup. The children, suppressed only with the greatest difficulty during Stanek's scholarly speech, now wiggled out from between their parents, crawled off, pushed against knees, and finally reached the freedom of the aisle. Their heavy boots thumped toward the kettles. A number of grownups, especially in the hindmost rows, stealthily got up and sidled over to the soup.

Stanek continued stubbornly. There were things he had to say, and he was going to say them. He talked on, about the meaning of economic freedom, about the necessity of maintaining the National Front Government, about . . .

Even Thomas, who was trying hard, could understand him no longer as chairs were shuffled, benches were moved, and as the whispering rose to a low murmur and, in the end, to loud, impatient remarks.

Stanek fought the uproar down to his final word. Thomas, Kravat and his men, and Karel applauded, but their applause was not taken up, except by a few polite souls.

"This is unforgivable!" said Kitty. "The old gentleman is shaking like a leaf. Why couldn't they wait with those kettles?"

"Yes, why couldn't they," Karel said dryly.

Thomas saw the Reverend Trnka confer with Joseph and Stanek. He expected Trnka to declare the meeting ended, or at least to permit an intermission for soup and beer. But apparently the three men on the stage decided that it would be impossible to call the meeting to order again after the refreshments had been served, for Trnka knocked long and energetically against his empty water glass and shouted, "Rebuttal! Rebuttal! Ladies and gentlemen—there must be a rebuttal! Will you please sit down? No soup will be served until I say so! Keep those children quiet! Rebuttal! — Mr. Joseph Benda!"

After Stanek, Joseph seemed to fill the whole stage with his tall figure and broad shoulders. His face was genial and understanding. He was obviously the favorite, if for no other reason than that his speech had been short and had not had to compete with the increasingly tantalizing odor of the soup. More than ever the boss, he could command silence, and he did.

"I would not think of taking up your time to answer all the points my learned opponent made," he said.

There was laughter, and some appreciative bravos. Of course, thought Thomas, of course he wouldn't answer.

"But I want to show you that perhaps he sees the situation too blackly, and I want to prove to you what I had to say about unity, and that a man

should be a Czech first and only afterwards consider his class and party interests."

Joseph was talking easily, he was taking his audience into his confidence and indicating by his voice and facial expression that he had something up his sleeve. This captured the attention, and for a moment the soup was forgotten.

"Now you all know that Professor Stanek is not really the important man in the Party opposing me. The important man here in Rodnik is someone else, and I know him very well, and I've worked with him very closely both before and after the war."

Karel's eyes were searching the hall.

Thomas looked at him. "What's Joseph up to?"

"As National Administrator of the Benda Works and of the Hammer Works in our neighboring Martinice, I have a fairly responsible position. But there is a position open of almost equal responsibility, and I mean the job of Resident Manager at the Hammer Works. For this job I am going to propose to the District National Committee — because I believe in the nation first and everything else long after that, and because he is a good man — my political enemy, the head of the Works Council at Benda, the brain behind Stanek — Frantisek Kravat!"

The applause was deafening, and it came from all sides. Kravat's clique and the political friends he had mustered were badly split. Some were startled and dumfounded; but most of them were just as pleased as were Joseph's followers, who saw the value of the surprise move. Almost everybody liked the dramatic climax, particularly because it brought the goulash soup within reach. Thomas was aware of Karel's bitter frown; but he, himself, appreciated Joseph's adroit stroke. The Bendas were certainly talented!

There was no question of further rebuttal from Stanek. Thomas saw Kravat push through the aisle. Kravat's face was flushed and angry, he was throwing his angular body against the men and women thronging around to congratulate him. He was gaining and breaking through, he had reached the stage, and was jumping up on it.

"Listen to me!" he shouted. "It's a maneuver —"

"Hurrah for Franta Kravat!" cheered the people. "Hurrah for Joseph Benda! Hurrah for unity!"

Kravat waved for quiet, but the people misunderstood and thought he was acknowledging their cheers, and they gave him more.

"Long live Franta Kravat!" "Long live Joseph Benda!" "No more speeches!" "Stand up there and shake hands!" "Hurrah!"

Thomas, still somewhat reluctant and yet moved by the enthusiasm, climbed up on his bench. "Hurrah for Professor Stanek!" he cried. He

smiled apologetically and looked down at Kitty and Karel. Kitty's eyes hung on Karel. Was she watching him for a cue as to what her reaction should be?

Then Karel was gone. Thomas found him again as he was clambering up on the stage. Joseph was coming toward Karel, hands extended. But Karel brushed past his brother. He walked over to Stanek and Kravat, and Thomas saw the three of them leave the stage together.

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE MOUNTAINSIDES were fresh with green, the air smelled new and good. The brooks were peacefully back in their beds, and the dark brown loam of the valleys was nearly covered by the pastels of the seeds bursting forth. Even the district authorities in Limberk were aware of the spring and had promised to repair the road that led from Rodnik over the hills to Martinice.

The taxi driver, careful of the brittle mechanism of his old car, strained with the effort of avoiding the holes which winter and the thaws had scooped into the roadbed. Karel took his eyes off the driver and glanced out of the window. They had already reached the rock that designated the halfway mark between the two glass towns. Cut deeply and jaggedly and in some strange, huge pattern, the rock appeared like a heathen god's attempt at creating a piece of crystal glass. At this rock Karel and his brothers, like generations of Rodnik children before them, had gathered on summer evenings to repeat the awesome stories the glassblowers had invented about it, and to shiver at the bats swishing out of its crevices. Past this rock, the border had run in those pregnant six months after the German annexation of Martinice and the Sudetenland; and from this rock, he and Thomas had gazed silently at the German outposts.

The road curved sharply. The car swerved and straightened again, and Karel was thrown against Kravat.

"Watch your bag," Kravat said. "Better put it on the floor. We had trouble enough getting you the stuff."

Karel complied wordlessly. He had a way of packing his instruments in his kit, and there was no danger to them even if the bag should slip from the seat; but he was tired of explaining to Kravat.

"It's only a few more days," Kravat went on with the argument he had started on departing from Rodnik. "If you do it at all, you'd have to do it now."

"I'm sure you'll make out all right in the elections, without my dragging family matters into the open."

Kravat pulled at his tie. He had to wear his tie and his one good suit every day, and he rarely felt comfortable in them. "I thought the goulash soup was enough to convince you."

Karel used his foot to push his bag into the corner of the car. "It was a filthy trick. The whole thing was. Platitudes and demagoguery."

"I wonder what it takes to get you intellectuals to do something!" Kravat said. He had finally tugged his tie completely awry and was turning his head toward Karel. "Tell me: What?"

"He's still my brother," Karel said quietly. "Also, I think people would resent it if I wrote to the newspapers and said that I was against Joseph. People around here live in small communities and they have a sense of family. They'd assume I had personal reasons for such a public declaration."

"That depends on how you word it!"

In the glass pane which separated the driver's seat from the rear part of the cab, Karel saw his blurred image: The wavering outline of his gray hair, indistinct eyes, and a double mouth. If Stanek and Kravat had only thought of asking him the night after the meeting in the auditorium—but either they had not thought of it, or had expected him to come forward on his own. Now he simply could not do it.

"What are you worried about?" he asked angrily. "Have you no confidence in people? Don't you think that after they ate the soup, they got wise to what was being played?"

"It'll be fifty-fifty in Rodnik," said Kravat. "We've worked hard."

"And in other parts of the district?"

"I'll say this for your brother Thomas—he at least had the courage to come out and say what he thought when he wrote that piece on freedom. We hoped you might counteract—"

"Thomas wrote about freedom, not about Joseph Benda!"

The car bounced, and Kravat was jolted from his seat. Annoyed, he rubbed the top of his head and said, "Manager! Now I'm being driven instead of sitting at the wheel. . . ."

"If you don't like being manager, why did you accept the job? It must have been quite clear to you that your promotion was just another political trick of Joseph's!"

Kravat leaned back and smiled. "He offered the job to me once before, as a bribe. I told him I didn't want it—and I still don't want it. But this time I had to take it because the Party told me to take it."

The Party told Kravat, thought Karel. And it is telling me now, through Kravat—whether it has a right to or not.

Kravat sighed. "They said we do not work for only one election. We work for the future. And for the future it is important that we hold positions of responsibility and that we train and develop people to hold them. If you could see your way clear to your responsibilities, Karel —"

"My responsibility is the health of the workers, in Rodnik, in Martinice, anywhere."

But Karel was pensive. In the end it would be Joseph who was fooled. The coup of kicking Kravat upstairs might have brought Joseph some momentary advantage; yet he had sowed a seed that would grow and grow and choke him.

"He's not a happy man these days. . . ." said Karel.

"Who isn't?"

"My brother Joseph."

"I know," said Kravat.

Karel looked at him questioningly.

"We've been making it hot for him," Kravat stated, "despite the goulash soup. And besides, Dolezhal has done him dirt."

"How did you find out?"

"We've known it from the day the candidates' lists were published."

Oh yes, thought Karel, the ridiculous truth had been very evident from the candidates' lists. Joseph's name came out third on his Party's slate for the district. Dolezhal's organization was pretty sure of garnering enough votes to elect two men — whether Joseph would squeeze through, ~~was~~ another question. Dolezhal was making use of the Benda strength in Rodnik, but the votes given Joseph would probably benefit only the list's two top candidates.

Kravat scratched himself. "Wouldn't it be funny if your brother were defeated and Stanek got in?"

"In a way it would be funny," said Karel, though he didn't feel funny about it. "So why do you want me to join in booting him in the pants?"

The taxi was wending through the first streets of Martinice. Kravat pulled up his tie and primed himself for his managerial role.

"Boot him in the pants?" he said. "You won't believe me, but I don't feel one way or the other about Joseph Benda. He doesn't matter — what he stands for, does."

If it was genuine, Kravat's supine objectivity was admirable. Karel wished that he had some of it; life would be a lot easier.

They drove into the yard of the Hammer Works. A man came running up, tore open the door, and bowed, "Good afternoon, Mr. Kravat! Good afternoon, Doctor!"

Kravat climbed out first.

The man bowed again. "There was a phone call for you from Rodnik, Mr. Kravat. They want you to call them back right away."

Krvat hurried to the office ahead of Karel. Karel looked at the buildings, at the thin, transparent spiral of smoke rising from the chimney, and wondered about these Germans who were always filled with imaginary illnesses and complaints. Swinging his bag, he ambled toward the door of the Works office.

He stopped as Kravat came rushing out. Kravat's tie was wrenched down again, and he had forgotten his hat.

"What's the trouble, Kravat?"

Krvat brushed him aside. "Driver!" he shouted at the taxi which was just about to pull out. "Stop, driver! I'm going back to Rodnik!" Then, turning to Karel, he ordered, "You stay here and proceed with your work. I'll send the car back for you."

"For God's sake, what has happened?"

Krvat made sure that no Germans were eavesdropping. "Joseph called," he said; and, lowering his voice, added: "The furnace at Benda has broken down."

Joseph sat in the furnace hall on a workbench and stared at the furnace.

The workers had been sent home, but the melter who had taken Kravat's place, the furnace foreman, and the team masters, a desolate cluster, stood at a discreet distance behind him. His strident reproaches were still in their ears: Such a breakdown did not occur overnight! There must have been indications days ago! Weeks ago! Why had they not reported to him? How was he supposed to manage the place if the men he trusted let him down?

Of course there had been indications — plenty of them. But it was difficult to explain why no report had come from anyone; so they had suffered the bitter outpour in silence. They could have made excuses. They could have said that Joseph, busy with his election campaign, had spent only a few hours a day at the Works, and that they had not wanted to take up that little time with their worries and apprehensions. They could have claimed that the daily report sheets, on which the steadily increasing amounts of rejects were faithfully listed, should have made Joseph investigate.

The new melter had noticed that the components which went into the raw glass took longer to melt than they should; but he could have mentioned in his defense that he was not as familiar with the furnace as Kravat had been, and that he had assumed the slow melting was a peculiarity of the installation at Benda.

The masters had observed that frequently the molten glass did not stay

pliable long enough to finish a piece on which the men were working; but they could have refused to take blame by stating that any of a half-dozen reasons might account for that.

The foreman had known that during the last week or so the finished glass had frequently contained irregularities—traces of undissolved quartz surrounded by the slight halo of devitrification, or the twin spiral lines of cords that might imply bad mixing or insufficient melting temperature. He had such pieces weeded out, even at the risk of shortages in serial production; but he could have told Joseph that everyone knew the wind had an influence on the draft in the furnace, and the wind, more often than not since the thaws, had been bad.

Yet none of them could make himself believe that these excuses were valid. The real reason for their hesitancy to report lay deep in their make-up. The furnace was more than a machine, more than a provider which, if shut down, would cause the loss of four or six weeks' work for themselves, for every man at Benda. It was more, too, than an irreplaceable aid in filling their quota of production and in helping their people to pull themselves out of the morass of postwar shortages and postwar misery. The furnace was actually something personal, its heat like the heat of their bodies, its characteristics as marked and as intimate as the habits of the members of their families—if you saw your old father begin to ail and waste away, it took time for you to admit it, even to yourself.

Then, on Friday morning, the crisis had come. All the gas the generator could furnish was being pumped through the grating; yet the temperature inside the furnace continued sliding. When it sank below eleven hundred degrees centigrade, the liquid glass in its pans turned into a sluggish mass too difficult to blow.

Joseph happened to be at the Works. The foreman's dejected manner, the gloomy faces of the masters pressing behind him into the door of the office, told Joseph the story almost before the foreman could blurt it out.

His first thought was: My furnace! What have they done to my furnace! His second: Why couldn't this have come a week from now, or three days from now? Why today, forty-eight hours before election Sunday? What a windfall for the Kravats, the Staneks, and all their little agitators! How they would spread the word through the glassmaking towns: *A fine Administrator, who lets our national property go to seed!* And not enough time to oppose their last-minute slanders with the truth! The truth was that not yet a year ago he, himself, out of his own pocket, had spent over a half million crowns to rebuild this furnace, the best, the most up-to-date that could be built—so why should he have neglected to care for it? The truth was that under certain circumstances the gas which

fed the flames had a tendency to deposit particles on the *chamotte* grating and to clog it up — how could any man, particularly the Administrator, be held accountable for the forces of nature? But lies could be dripped into men's ears, truth had to be pounded into their brains.

Dimly, he saw one way out. In some manner the very people who would attack him must be involved in the decisions which had to be made. That's why, acting on instinct more than on deliberation, he had called Kravat; or, perhaps, it was that in the collapse of something so close to the meaning of his life he wanted near him a person, albeit an enemy, who also had a love for this structure of brick and mortar. He did not know. Everything was so mixed up.

He sat and waited and mourned. Everything, animate and inanimate, conspired against him. The nation for which he had fought had stolen his life's work from him; his brothers had turned their backs on him; if his wife was capable of love, no inspiration came to him from it; his child was lonely and refused to open herself up to him; the Party he had chosen was using him for its own ends; and now the soft wind that came from the hills on which he had grown and for which he had longed in the years of his exile, had slagged up his furnace and blown down his plans.

What was he struggling for? Why didn't he strike off his ambitions and accept the facts as they had come to be — remain an official, do a routine job, live on ten thousand crowns a month, leave the worrying to others, and design new models of glass when the spirit moved him? Even a horse that has run is led to its stable and allowed to rest. Only man, his kind of man, had to go on racing, always trying to keep ahead, counting, weighing, and scheming, until ulcers caught up with him and he bled out his guts.

He heard Kravat behind him talking to the foreman, but he did not turn around. Kravat finally sat down next to him. He looked at Joseph's large hands lying flat on his knees; then he followed Joseph's fixed stare and, for a while, neither of them spoke.

"If I told you that this hurts me inside" — Joseph broke the silence — "you'd laugh at me."

"It happened all of a sudden?" asked Kravat.

Joseph shook his head. "Nothing happens all of a sudden. It's just that our eyes aren't fine enough to notice a gradual change until it has reached a certain point."

Kravat resisted the sadness and resignation in Joseph's voice. "Don't worry!" he said harshly. "It's not your furnace — not any more."

Joseph winced. But it was this rough, factual statement which released his coiled-up thoughts and gave him the gimmick he needed.

"It's not my furnace," he repeated. "Nothing here belongs to me. That

makes it simple, doesn't it? We'll stop work and wait till the furnace cools off completely. Then we start the repair job. It'll take six weeks, or thereabouts. It'll cost the Government five or six hundred thousand crowns. It's nothing out of my skin. This socialism is really a blessing in disguise!"

The deadly logic in Joseph's words set Kravat's teeth on edge. All right, nobody would starve; the men would get unemployment insurance. But six weeks' worth of glass would go down the drain, and they'd never be able to catch up with the losses.

"Are you serious about that, Mr. Benda?" he asked.

"If the furnace breaks down, it has to be cooled off and torn apart and rebuilt and slowly reheated."

"But it can be done differently!" Kravat said sharply. He was disgusted. Up to now, it had not occurred to him that the breakdown of the furnace could be turned into an argument against nationalization. He could see Joseph using it, too. This easy dismissal of all other possibilities in favor of an arbitrary shutdown of the furnace and the Benda Works smacked of sabotage.

"Yes, it can be done differently," confirmed Joseph, moving his hands slightly. "And if I still owned the Works, I'd have it done. I'd save myself money. I'd have the furnace going after a few days. And if something went wrong, I would take the blame. But as it is, I'm only an employee. I can't take any risks."

Kravat sensed that from behind the wall of his smugness Joseph was trying to feel him out.

"The trouble is, you misunderstand me," shrugged Joseph. "After that meeting in the auditorium, you think I'm a sonofabitch."

Kravat did not answer.

"I am, but not by choice. I wish I could be open and aboveboard; but if I were, you fellows would trample all over me."

Still Kravat said nothing.

Joseph seemed to make himself ready for a plunge. "I'll tell you, Kravat — if I look at this furnace, it feels to me as if I look at a piece of myself. I cannot get accustomed to the idea that it no longer belongs to me. But if I act on my impulse, if I say, Let's try and repair it over the week end, you're going to call me a slave driver. If I order the men to rip up the opening under the grate and to go inside the furnace while it's still burning hot, they'll reply: Go to hell! This isn't the old times! Who's this Joseph Benda that he wants us to scorch our hands and our eyes and our lungs! He doesn't care what happens to us as long as he gets that furnace back in shape for the elections!"

So it's the elections, thought Kravat. But he said quietly, "We happen to feel that the furnace belongs to us."

"I built it!" said Joseph.

"We built it. With our hands."

Joseph watched Kravat and gauged to what extent the man had lost his reserve. "Let's not quibble," he said. "Let's admit that you and I and all of us feel the same about the furnace."

"The same," said Kravat, "and not the same."

At that moment Joseph reversed himself again. "No," he said, "a quick repair won't be possible."

"And why not?" Kravat asked, his suspicion once more alerted by Joseph's fast switch.

"Because of your socialism, Kravat! Because you've wished on us regulations and restrictions and official interferences—and a Works doctor. And I know my brother Karel! He once saw a man die under a furnace grating, in this very hall. Matjey was his name; it was before your time. And since then, Karel has soaked up the wisdom of the universities, where they think it's impossible for a man to work in a temperature of three hundred degrees centigrade. What do they know in their laboratories about how much a Czech glassworker can take . . ."

Kravat no longer listened closely. All this talk of Joseph's about a personal relation to the furnace was hogwash. There was only one thing for which Joseph had feeling—his profits. And those had been crimped. Joseph was delighted with a legal excuse for cutting out six weeks' production!

"Don't underestimate Karel!" Joseph went on. "He's got connections. And he'd never give his permission for the kind of emergency repairs you and I have in mind. Or if he gave it, he'd insist on checking every man and his lungs and his heart and what not, and by the time he was through, we wouldn't have a dozen men left for the job, and the furnace would be dead and cold, and it would take us weeks to get it going again. All I can say, Kravat, is that you're skidding in your own mess."

Now Joseph was hiding behind Karel. In the back of Kravat's mind the angry voice sounded again, *My responsibility is the health of the workers!* It was Kravat's responsibility, too, but there was a greater one: production, the future. And as opposed to the books and the laboratories was the fact that glassworkers had stepped into glowing hot furnaces when the professors at the universities still preached that the sun circled around the earth.

Kravat rose. Whatever arguments Joseph was spinning for or against, whatever snares he was laying, had probably to do with the elections or some other underhanded plot that would defeat itself before long. But here *was* the empty platform around the furnace, and here *was* the work

waiting to be done! Kravat called over the foreman, the melter, and the masters.

"Mr. Benda and I," he said, "feel that we should try to repair the furnace without tearing it apart, unless we find on further investigation that the damage is too heavy."

The men nodded and mumbled that they agreed.

"In that way we won't lose more than a few days of work."

The approval became distinct.

"You all have previous experience in jobs of this kind?"

The men said they had, and some of them claimed to have participated any number of times in repairing a hot furnace.

A shadow glided over Kravat's face. "We'll be very careful, though! Anybody who's got trouble with his heart or his lungs will be excused."

Joseph looked at the scene. His despondency was gone completely, and he had the indifferent expression of a bystander. There would be no attack on him over the breakdown of the furnace, now or in the future. Kravat and the men were identified with him. The group, the committee, the council had always been the weapon of his enemies; he had wrested it from them and bent it to his own purposes.

"We can't start this job on Sunday," Kravat continued, "because that's election day. So get everyone to report on Monday at five in the morning. I'll join you myself."

Joseph, hands in his pockets, stepped among the group. "I'd like to say that I agree absolutely with Kravat's proposals. And if you men will let me, I'll come around here sometime on Monday and take a fling myself at going into the furnace."

"I'll be God-damned!" said Kravat, "if you're not still electioneering!"

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE SECOND-CLASS carriage on the evening local from Prague had only one passenger detraining at Rodnik — Elinor Simpson. Few people were traveling on that Saturday before the elections; almost everyone was staying close to his home and polling place. The propaganda of all four political parties had stressed the urgency of voting in this first regular election after the war, and the people took their duty seriously, particularly because in the years under the Nazis they had been deprived of this right.

The conductor, pleased by the presence of the interesting foreigner on his usually boring run, and expecting an ample tip, handed her baggage through the window to the Rodnik station dispatcher. The dispatcher carted the bags across the tracks to the ticket window before returning to the side of the train and signaling the engineer to pull out. As the train chugged off and rattled into the distance, he turned to Elinor and said, "My compliments, gracious lady!" and asked her with unconcealed curiosity where she was headed.

She did not answer. What little Czech she had picked up was not sufficient to understand the dispatcher's colloquial question; besides, she had hardly heard him because she was fascinated by a huge poster slapped on the side wall of the station. It showed the upper half of a tall man in silk hat and formal attire, one large, fat hand grabbing a moneybag, the other choking the throat of an ill-fed, ill-clad, and generally unhappy-looking worker. The strange thing about the poster was that while the face under the silk hat was a pig's, it had, on closer inspection, certain unmistakable characteristics of Joseph Benda—his high cheekbones, his heavy-lidded eyes, his cleft chin. Somebody had done an excellent and devastating caricature. Elinor could well imagine Joseph's slow burning anger on seeing it the first time. She was able to translate the slogans splashed across the sheet. *Do you want this back again?* was printed on top; and underneath, over the stomach of the man with the pig's face: *If you don't — Vote Communist! Vote for Stanek!*

"Where do you wish to go, madame?" the dispatcher repeated, this time in German.

Haltingly, she explained that she would like a taxi to take her to the residence of Mr. Joseph Benda.

The dispatcher inclined his head toward the poster. "Poor Mr. Benda!" he said regretfully. "What they don't do to such a good and kind man! . . . Shall I phone for the taxi?"

She said thank you, and he went to his official telephone behind the ticket window, cranked the handle endlessly, and finally got through his message. Then he came out again.

"What do you think?" asked Elinor. "Will he win?"

The dispatcher made a rapid mental calculation of the tip she was likely to give, and how far she would increase it if he told her what she probably wanted to hear.

"There are many bad people around here," he said carefully, "bad and stupid people. Mr. Benda is shrewd, though, and the nice folk like him."

"But do you believe it will be an honest election?"

The dispatcher shrugged expressively. "Ah, the crooks!" he exclaimed. "There are always crooks. One must watch them like a hawk!"

"I don't mean crooks. I mean political pressure. Terror!"

The man creased his face and lowered his voice. "I don't know. . . ."

"You mean you can't tell?"

"I just don't know! Madame, I am only a poor official of the State Railroads —"

"Thank you," she said, "you've told me enough."

The taxi drove up.

"Thank you very much," she said and slipped the dispatcher a bill.

He touched the shield of his cap, "My very best compliments, gracious lady!" Then he stowed the bags in her cab, closed the door of the car behind her, and looked at the bill.

It was a hundred crowns. Fools, those foreigners!

"How nice of you to come, Professor Stanek," said Thomas. "Please, sit down."

Stanek settled on the couch in Thomas's study and replied courteously, "How nice of you to invite me!"

Thomas smiled diffidently; it had taken a lot of self-persuasion to issue the invitation, and even so, he had hardly believed that Stanek would accept.

Kitty came to the door with a bottle of Melnik wine which was a little vinegary but the best that could be had. The Professor stood up. "Come in, Kitty," said Thomas, taking three glasses from the decanter set in his cabinet. He poured the wine and passed the glasses around. Stanek raised his, "To your very good health, madame!"

"Thank you!" Kitty drank. On the evening before election, she felt she should have toasted her guest's success; she could not make herself do it. She knew Joseph's shortcomings, and Karel had told her of the conflicts that tore family and country; yet, it was awkward to her that Thomas, who was supporting Joseph publicly, should spend tonight with Joseph's opponent. But Thomas seemed not to be conscious of the incongruity, or if he was, he did not care.

The invitation, this much she was sure of, was directly connected with the bulging envelope he had received from Stanek the previous day; Thomas must have been stirred by its contents, because she had heard him pace his room and mutter to himself.

"I was the most surprised man, Professor," said Thomas, "when you let me know that you would be free tonight. . . ."

Stanek twirled his pince-nez. "This is like before an examination. Don't you recall, Thomas Benda, I always advised my students not to cram the last night, but to go out and amuse themselves — moderately — and get the cobwebs out of their heads?"

"Yes, so you did." Thomas picked up his glass. "To the old days!"

Stanek slowly shook his head. "To the new times!"

Thomas laughed. "All right. To the new times, whatever that means!"

For a while they sat quietly, following their own thoughts.

"May I ask you a question?" Thomas said finally. "What made you send me this transcript of your speech at the auditorium? All things considered, my role is presumably that of the Spokesman for everything you stand against. . . ."

Stanek rubbed the saddle of his nose. "I thought you would ask me that. Frankly, I had several motives." He paused.

Kitty was not certain whether Thomas wanted her to stay on, but Stanek appeared to be addressing her as much as him.

"I remembered Thomas Benda — one of my most gifted students. I remembered Thomas Benda who had worked with me — and with Joseph and Karel — in a group which later became a cell in the underground. More essential, I remembered that your statement on freedom, which was to be the basis for that debate in the auditorium, was only the announcement of a forthcoming book."

Thomas felt the affectionate interest that spoke from the Professor. The old man was giving him more credit than Karel, his own brother, had granted him. "I have read your speech," he said cautiously, "and I will read it again. Perhaps it can help me to clarify some ideas I've been developing."

Stanek's face brightened. "I'd be glad if it helped you!" he said, and to Kitty, "I don't measure the success of a meeting by the size of emotions evoked, or by the volume of applause." He pushed his starched cuffs back into place and added smilingly, "Mr. Joseph Benda is a difficult man to debate against, don't you agree with me?"

"He knows what he's after," Thomas said impatiently. He wanted Stanek to return to the book; he had been so alone at his desk and with his papers; whether Stanek was for or against the book, at least he could discuss it intelligently.

"I listened to your brother," said Stanek, "and when he was through, I knew I could not compete with his — well, his superficial approach. He was very good, very successful —"

Thomas frowned. Surely Stanek hadn't come to talk about Joseph and to solicit a couple of votes for himself.

"I have no children," Stanek said suddenly. "I don't believe in life after death, in paradise, or hell, or the transmigration of souls."

A draft came through the open window and stirred his thin, white hair.

"And yet, I don't want everything I learned and lived for to die with me. . . ." He laughed his high-pitched old man's laugh.

Kitty was puzzled and even disturbed by the Professor's mention of chil-

dren, though it was a most natural thought for him to have in this beautiful, well-appointed little house with only two young people in it.

"One must have the long view, don't you think so?" said Stanek. "Your brother hasn't. That's why I decided, after he had finished, that I would pick my audience. You and your statement had been the stone that set the whole thing rolling. I picked you."

"That's very flattering," said Thomas, "but I'm hard to convince. I don't know whether I want to be convinced. I like to come to my own conclusions."

Stanek nodded. "I did not expect anything different of you. I said as much to my friends. The best I can hope for is that you will take my viewpoints under consideration."

"Your friends?" questioned Thomas.

"Yes, of course!" said Stanek, fitting his frayed tie back on to his collar. "I don't proceed on impulse and I don't work alone. Before I made up my mind to send you the transcript, I discussed the matter with some of my friends."

"Political friends?" asked Thomas, the lines on his forehead deepening.

"Yes."

"And they gave you their permission?"

"I will be quite open. They had their doubts as to the wisdom of my move. Some said you were just your brother's brother, others were even harsher —"

Thomas started angrily, but controlled himself. "What did they say?"

"What difference does it make? I'm here, tonight."

"They said I had sold out, didn't they?" Thomas's mouth had become thin, his hands were gripping one another. He *had* sold out; his contract with Barsiny of Humanita had been his price; except he was going to make certain that the matter didn't end there.

Stanek observed the reaction. Dispassionately, he continued, "I told them I could understand you better than they could. I told them I was an intellectual like you — after a fashion. . . ."

He smiled.

"I said that we were exposed to temptations they seldom, if ever, encountered — nothing that had to do with money or with the ordinary ways of corruption. I tried to explain to them about the horror of loneliness from which one can escape by compromising; about the seduction by sentiments and big, popular words; about the comfort that lies in failing to pursue ideas to their final consequence; the lure of the easy way out; the fear of choosing sides, of throwing oneself into battles. . . ."

He cleared his throat.

"More wine?" asked Kitty. She was beginning to like the old man very

much, because he was fatherly and had compassion, and because, for the first time, she heard expressed the troubles besetting Thomas which she had sensed but had been unable to define and grasp. Karel had that kind of understanding.

Thomas was under the same spell; he forced himself, however, to remain wary. "So you conferred with your friends," he said, his voice even. "You're not a free agent, Professor?"

Stanek sipped the wine and moistened his tongue and his lips and asked peacefully, "Why am I not?"

"Because you have to ask permission! Because you didn't have the stomach to come to me when, as, and if you like!"

The sudden onslaught caught Stanek without an answer.

"Freedom! Is that freedom?" Thomas grew excited. "That's just what I'm worried about — that if you ever succeed in fully establishing the kind of society you dream of, every one of us will have to ask permission on what to write and with whom to consort and where to go! What do your friends know about you, about me, about our work? Who are those people who do, or do not, give permission?"

Stanek let his pince-nez fall down to his vest. His hand shot out, and for a moment the blue concentration camp tattoo showed above his meager wrist. "You and I," he said, "you and I, Thomas, we are those people!"

"But this is the most blatant nonsense! We will be the objects of decision!"

Kitty had followed the argument tensely. She was getting another, deeper glimpse into what freedom and Thomas's book and Thomas's problems were about, and how difficult every hour of his work must be; and she felt a weight on her heart. Parts of what Stanek and Thomas had been saying seemed vaguely reminiscent; she wondered if Karel had touched on some of it that evening in his flat. No one point that she could remember exactly — perhaps he had not dealt with these things at all, perhaps he had not developed them their way; or was it that at times the rational meaning of his words slipped past her because an inner ear deep inside her was tuned to his voice, to the fact of being within sound of him? I must stop thinking about him, she said to herself. I must find something else.

She heard the Professor lecture, "There will be a State in which we will be both the objects of decision and the men who decide, both ruled and rulers, both servants and masters, because we will be masters of ourselves."

"Casuistry!" said Thomas.

"No, it is the natural status of things, it is life itself! Everything moves, changes constantly, goes on simultaneously on several levels. We are givers and takers, providers and provided, lovers and beloved. And freedom lies in being a member of the whole, under its discipline, and yet determining its course."

Stanek had spoken with a sincerity which was beyond questioning. He was not even trying to argue; he was giving a credo.

To Thomas, this synthesis of contrasts was too new, too surprising, too incredible. He was accustomed to seeing both sides of an issue, and often enough, the two-sidedness had been destructive to him; but that these two sides, on some plane or at some time, could and should become one — “Either you’re free or you’re not, but you can’t have your cake and eat it, too, as the Americans say. In any case, all this goes far beyond what you said in your speech and what I was prepared to discuss.”

Stanek studied him long and hard, his eyes bright. Stanek felt that he had been right — Thomas was not merely a mouthpiece, and was worth talking to.

“I know,” he said, “what I told you tonight is more than a résumé of my speech; but it grows out of it. Don’t you agree?”

He was in no mood to let Thomas off before having forced him down to the bottom of the problem; he was fresh and stimulated; he liked the atmosphere in the house on St. Nepomuk, he liked Thomas and Thomas’s young wife, her wholesomeness, her attendance on her husband and himself; cooped up in his bachelor quarters, in his school, in his political activities, he missed these little luxuries.

“I want to get back to the speech,” insisted Thomas, “because in it you posed one question that interested me: Freedom for *whom*? I, too, have been concerned about that — for egotistical reasons, among others. Will I belong to those who are permitted freedom?”

Stanek laughed. “How can I answer that? I don’t know what you will turn out to be, in the end. But this I do know: That in order to attain the freedom I talked about — that greater freedom! — we shall probably have to curb the freedom of those who would use it to maintain their own power and to keep us in shackles to the end of our days.”

“That greater freedom!” cried Thomas. “That music of the future — ”

“Have you ever heard the story of Jan Zizka and the citizens of Prachatice?” Stanek broke in.

Thomas was not interested in old stories, and showed it.

But Stanek was undeterred. “What did the Hussites fight for? The right to speak the truth as they saw it, and freedom from their feudal lords and the Catholic Church — isn’t that so? And then the Hussite armies under Zizka came to the city of Prachatice, and the citizens didn’t want to co-operate. So Zizka sent them a letter, and I want to quote it, Thomas, because there’s a point in it for you. *You will accept these truths as we do and you will assist us against all hypocrites and faithless Christians who oppose these holy truths.* . . . You note that for Zizka, in the struggle for freedom, there is only one side — the others are hypocrites and faithless Chris-

tians. Then he goes on to say: *If you do not, we shall assume that you choose to be an enemy of God and of all the Tabor Brethren.* In other words, though he fights for freedom, he does not grant it to the enemies of his God while the fight lasts. And Zizka's fight has never ceased."

Kitty sat up. There it was, now she remembered it, that unmitigated *Either-Or* which Karel had posed. What had become of Zizka? They had spanned his skin over the frame of a drum. . . .

"That greater freedom!" Thomas repeated sadly. "And meanwhile you go about planning to curb the little freedom we have. Are you to determine who shall or shall not have freedom? What qualifies you? We've had some experience with dictators since Zizka's day. Who guarantees that you'll be a whit different from them?"

"You can guarantee it," said Stanek. "You, your wife Kitty, everyone. You're not outside this nation, you are part of it. You can distinguish good from evil, you can judge for yourself and you are judge over yourself. That, by the way, is not a new idea. It is democracy; the real democracy."

Thomas was silent. He was both attracted and repelled by Stanek's vision. He wanted this kind of democracy and yet was afraid of it. He wanted it, because men were created equal; he was afraid of it, because the creation had gone wrong and had filled the world with mediocrities. And now, Stanek wanted these mediocrities to become judges over themselves and over him, Thomas Benda! No, that was not the freedom he wanted. He wanted freedom for himself to be himself, with all his foibles and weaknesses and all his talent.

But this he could not tell Stanek, because Stanek would have understood too well and, perhaps, thought less of him.

No one was at home when Elinor arrived at Joseph's house. The maid gave her a letter which read:

DEAR ELINOR: —

I apologize for not being able to welcome you. You know these election campaigns — busy, busy, busy. Tonight it's a meeting in the district town of Limberk, the last shindig of the campaign, and I'm having the family along for effect. The maid will show you to your room. Make yourself at home; the whole house is at your disposal; you remember from last time where Lida keeps the liquor, the key is inside the empty inkwell on her desk. See you around midnight.

Ever,

JOSEPH

Elinor chuckled to herself. It was Joseph all over — kind, gracious, thoughtful, and not above having her raid Lida's precious bottles. It was a good idea at that; the ride to Rodnik had been dismal, and she

could picture a quiet evening in an easy chair, Scotch and ice handy.

She had the maid carry her baggage upstairs, and debated the question with herself. It was a nice picture, but she knew what would happen. After ten or fifteen minutes of restful silence and dreams, her haunches would begin to itch, she would struggle out of the chair, walk up and down, try to find a book, maybe read a few pages, put it aside. In America, or in Paris, she would have gone to the nearest bar and talked to people; but here, this damned language blocked her.

Besides, she had come back to Rodnik for more than professional reasons. She wanted to say good-by to Thomas. That's why she had accepted so eagerly when the chief of the Paris bureau of her syndicate had made the pointed suggestion that he might like to have a feature writer in Czechoslovakia for the elections, in addition to the regular staff which covered them.

Say good-by — she ought to have sense enough to leave him alone, now. She had safely launched him on his new project; she had tacked him to the side to which he belonged; she had given him enough to chew on for a while; and when the book came out and stirred a tempest in the Czechoslovak teacup, she would sit back home at her desk and read about it and enjoy the thought of it.

And yet, she could not get rid of the memory of his face. Even in Paris, where things had been vastly more exciting and amusing than in Prague, it had stuck with her. Who knows what goes on in the layers of one's brain that lie below the level of reason? Perhaps the affair on the sleeper from St. Louis to Kansas City had left traces so fine and so insidious that she was aware of them only at hours like this one — alone, with an empty evening on her hands.

She succeeded in making the maid understand that she wanted a taxi. Then she went upstairs, unpacked her toilet kit, and freshened up. She was down again before the taxi arrived. She found Lida's desk and the inkwell with the key in it; she took a bottle of whisky out of the right-hand side of Lida's credenza.

Outside, the taxi honked.

She hastily swallowed a drink and left the bottle on the table for the maid to nip from.

"Good evening, Kitty!"

"Why — Elinor —"

"Aren't you going to ask me in? I'm not that much of a surprise! What's going on here? Do you have guests?"

"Come in," said Kitty, opening the door wide, "I didn't know you were back."

"Thomas is home, isn't he?"

"Yes."

Elinor looked down at her. "Will you tell Thomas that I'm here —"

It wasn't necessary. Thomas was coming out of his study; he saw Elinor; annoyance flared up in him and quickly gave way to a mischievous anticipation of what was going to happen to her in a moment.

"Elinor, my dear — you should have written! I would have met you at the station!"

"I did write," she protested. "Didn't Joseph tell you?"

"Joseph? Joseph makes speeches and runs two factories as well as Vesely's and is busy being a big man."

He took her arm and led her into the study. The old man got up from the couch and came forward.

"Elinor!" said Thomas, "my high school teacher, Professor Stanek. Professor Stanek — this is Elinor Simpson, the great American journalist to whom I owe my life. What will you have to drink, Elinor?"

"Stanek?" she wondered out loud. "Stanek — the name is familiar. . . ." She snapped her fingers. "Isn't it too stupid — no, don't tell me, don't tell me! It happens to you, too, doesn't it? There's a definite association in your mind, but it doesn't quite click. . . . Anyhow, Thomas, how's the book? Are you working on it? Joseph mailed your statement to me in Paris, plus a translation. I think it's great stuff — don't you, Professor? You see, I'm a kind of godmother to Thomas's new book on Freedom —"

The mischievous glint vanished from Thomas's eyes. He reddened with embarrassment over her claim to his book and his ideas. He could not bring himself to face Stanek.

"Stanek . . ." she said. "Stanek — why, of course! You're the candidate here of the Communist Party!"

"Yes, madame."

"We've been drinking native wine," said Kitty, "but you don't like it, I know. Would you want some whisky?"

Elinor paid no attention to her. "Very interesting, psychologically," she went on. "It simply did not occur to me who you were, Professor Stanek, because I never expected to see you here."

Kitty froze up.

"Now, now, Elinor!" Thomas interjected, "isn't it possible for cultivated people to meet, whatever opinions they may have? Isn't it possible to discuss an issue objectively?"

Stanek said, "If you will forgive me — it is late, and tomorrow will be a busy day for me."

"Please don't go," begged Kitty.

"No, it is not possible!" said Elinor. "Not with these people. To them

nothing is objective, and if nobody watches out for you, Thomas, you'll only become their cat's-paw."

Thomas's voice lost all timbre in his anger. "I don't need anyone to watch over me. And I will have no one dictate to me about my friends, or my discussions, or my books."

"Good night, Thomas Benda," said Stanek. "I hope I've been of some help to you."

"You have, you have," Thomas replied brusquely.

"Don't bother to take me to the door. You still have a guest. Good night, Miss Simpson. It was a pleasure to meet you." Stanek shoved his pince-nez into his breast pocket and shuffled out, Kitty behind him.

Thomas and Elinor faced one another in a silence that seemed to crackle. Suddenly, she sat down. A great and genuine sadness spread over her face.

"Oh, Thomas, Thomas," she said, "you've hurt me. And Joseph! I wouldn't dream of telling him about this — conniving behind his back, with his enemy. . . . When an ordinary person does it, your brother Karel, for instance, it means little more than a sting you can forget. But a betrayal by you — you have a responsibility, you are the Spokesman!"

He laughed. Even she could not believe that kind of corn! And yet it wasn't pretense — she meant every word. Perhaps seeing Stanek tonight had been tactless; perhaps he should have waited until the elections were over.

"You're blowing this thing up bigger than it is," he said, wishing that Kitty would return and save him from a mutual unburdening of hearts.

"I hope I am," she said, "I hope to God I am. I'm leaving for the States, next week, and I'd hate to go feeling that all I did for you was spoiled by one of your whims."

He could hear faint kitchen noises. He had trained Kitty to be discreet and to let him alone in his work and in his talks with people his size. Now he wished she were not that obedient.

"I won't see you for a long time," said Elinor.

"I've outlined the book, and I know pretty much where I'm heading."

"Don't you want to talk about it?" she coaxed.

"No."

She was angry with herself. She was practically begging him, who should come begging to her, and he sat there, self-sufficient, self-assured, and puffed up by ideas he thought he had discovered. A fine Golem she had created!

"Well, forget it," she said lightly. "This isn't what I came back here for, all the way from Paris."

She got up and came over to his chair.

"I like you very much, Thomas," she said. "More than I knew. But I'm

much too old and much too sensible to do anything about it. I just wanted you to know it. Don't ever again do anything to hurt me. I've made you a great man; now I'll tell you a secret."

He was only half-listening.

"Back in Hollywood, we have something called type-casting. Do you know what that is?"

He did not answer.

"We take an actor and give him a role and make him popular, and from that time on he can only play the same kind of role; the public won't accept him in any other. I've cast you in a role, and you cannot get out of it. It would kill you to try."

He smiled at her.

"Now let me give you a secret in return for yours," he said comfortably. "In the office of my publishers, I allowed you to force me into a statement which was a lie, because it was a half-truth. Now I'm going to write a book, and this book will not be what you think it's going to be and what you want. It will be something new. It will be my declaration of independence from you and from anyone else who imagined he was running my life. And there isn't a damned thing you can do about it!"

It was as if she had received a physical blow and were rocking on her feet.

"Kitty!" he called.

Kitty came quickly.

"I thought we were giving Elinor some Scotch. We still have half a bottle, don't we?"

"Thank you," said Elinor. "I've done too much drinking today. Just get me a taxi."

"A taxi for Elinor — will you phone and come back, please, Kitty?"

Until the cab arrived, they talked of inconsequential things — whether Elinor would fly across the ocean, and how it felt up in the air with nothing but rippled water underneath; of the Paris black market; and how difficult it was to get decent clothes in Prague. Kitty was the mainstay of this conversation. She saw that Elinor was severely shaken, and though she did not know what had happened and what had passed between the two, she had a sense of triumph — but it was somehow impersonal.

She went with Thomas when he took Elinor to the cab. Together, they re-entered the house. In the hallway, he took her into his arms. She felt his relief and his joy and she was glad for him. He is changing, she thought; and then she thought, If I had a child, I'd have something to love. The child wouldn't have to be like a stranger in the house at all.

He kissed her, hard.

Her body rose to his and became soft and giving. She hadn't felt that

close to him since — oh, why check back? "I want a child, Thomas!" she said.

He was looking over her head. "I banished a ghost, there," he chuckled. "Perfect job, too."

Her arms fell. Her heart shriveled. Her voice was dead as she said, "I'm sure you did the banishing beautifully."

He turned her playfully around and led her upstairs, to the bedroom. On the landing, he stopped. "A child, Kitty? You've changed your mind again?"

She had no answer.

"When I've finished my book," he said, and smiled to himself.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

PETRA knocked at the door to the guest room. There was no "Come in!" so she knocked again. She opened the door a slit, and finally tiptoed into the room, and stopped in her tracks.

What she saw was frightening. The gray mane sprawled over the pillow like a tangled mop. Eye shades made distorted sockets in a shapeless, pasty-white face; it was, in fact, no face at all, just the rough of one. Petra inched forward; with the tip of her finger softly, softly — and shuddering at the same time — she touched the face and felt it crumble.

Elinor sat up with a start, tore off her eye shades, and blinked.

"Oh, it's you!" she said, moved her chin several times and stretched her lips. "Disgusting stuff . . . It dries on you overnight, and cakes."

"Seven — o'clock," stammered Petra.

"I must look a fright," Elinor yawned. "But don't let it scare you. I dare-say there will be a time in your life when you'll use all this — " she waved at the array of bottles and tubes on her night table. "It's all good stuff! Just got it in Paris. Come here! Want to try some?"

She pulled Petra close, reached for a bottle with an atomizer, and sprayed. "Smells good, doesn't it?"

Petra was losing her fear. Her mother had bottles, too, and pastes — not many; Petra didn't think her mother slept with white plaster on her face. Her father would certainly not stand for that. And yet, if it made you beautiful . . . ?

Elinor was cold-creaming her mask and wiping it off with tissues.

"Nice — your skin . . ." Petra offered shyly.

"How can it be nice — at this ungodly hour!"

Petra picked for words in her limited English vocabulary. "Father said — get up. Election start — eight o'clock."

Elinor stuck her feet out of the bed and threw a lacy pink robe around her shoulders. Petra noticed that her feet were small and perfectly shaped, and that her toenails were painted an exciting purple red.

Elinor observed her expression with amusement. "Sit down on the bed, Petra," she ordered. Then she squatted on the floor and took off Petra's shoes and stockings. "Reach me that bottle, will you? — no, not that one — the little one over there — thank you — and that cardboard box!" She picked tiny cotton pads from the box and shoved them between Petra's toes. With amazed eyes, Petra watched Elinor take out of the bottle an infinitesimally fine brush, which was attached to the stopper, and move it over her toenails; one after the other, they gleamed up at her, a bright and shining red.

Elinor cocked her head and appraised her work. Satisfied, she patted Petra's ankle. "Let them dry for a few minutes, child, and don't show them to your mother. I don't want to be accused of corrupting your rustic simplicity." She disappeared into the bathroom and when she emerged her face was scrubbed and she smelled of dentifrice. Petra was still sitting on the bed, her knees unbent, her toes spread.

"Now put on your shoes and stockings!" said Elinor. "And run off and tell your father that I'll be down presently. You don't expect me to show you all my secrets?"

Petra got up and walked out gingerly, for fear of scratching the paint on her toes.

Joseph was seated at the head of the breakfast table, an unfinished cup of coffee before him, a half-eaten roll on his plate. The Sunday papers, with their final election appeals, stood propped against the coffeepot; he was reading a front-page editorial.

Petra slid into her chair, reached for a slice of bread, and sat back, quietly daydreaming. Soon it would be summer, and they might go swimming where the Suska River was dammed up and became a little lake, and her feet, as small and as well-formed as Elinor's, would look beautiful with the paint on the toes, and Karel would notice them and be fascinated.

Without looking up from his paper, Joseph asked, "Would you like to live in Prague, Petra?"

She dropped her bread. "Why?"

"I might be elected, Petra, and spend a great deal of time there. You're old enough for a better education than you can get here in Rodnik. And furthermore, here you're shut in too much with yourse'f."

He glanced at her over his paper. She was pale. What a radiant spring

it was outside, the birds singing through the open window! And she was pale and pinched.

The whirlwind of thoughts tearing through Petra's mind settled into the one: *He* has betrayed me; *he* wants to be rid of me; *he* has told my father to ship me off to Prague!

"I won't go!" she said, her voice choking.

Joseph, who had expected no such resistance, put down his paper. Was she heading into another of her tantrums? And what for? "But think how nice it will be," he cajoled. "Just you and I — in the big city. And you will have friends. . . ."

Lida came in. She had heard Joseph's last words, and cut in, "So you've told her? And I asked you not to! You're counting your chickens before they're hatched!"

"I won't go!" Petra said sullenly.

"You will go whenever and wherever your father says, Petra." Lida's voice was firm under its thin coat of kindness. "You're a grown girl now, but you aren't so grown-up that you can decide for yourself what's good for you!" She turned to Joseph, "Of course, I'm only a woman, so I'm superstitious. Why couldn't you wait with telling her until you were sure of being elected and going to Prague —"

Joseph deliberately buttered the rest of his roll. "It is a perfectly sound idea, and I've been thinking about it a long time, and I felt it wise to prepare Petra for the eventuality. On the basis of our Party analyses my chances are very good. All we need is some seventy-five thousand votes —"

"There we go again!" said Lida. She was angry, because she had poured too much milk into her coffee and caused it to spill over, and now she had to pour it back from the saucer into the cup. "There we go again! I hope and pray that you're right — but if you ride so high and mighty in the morning, how will you feel at night?"

"You won't win!" Petra said suddenly. "You won't win because I don't want you to win!"

"Petra!" Lida said flatly. "Apologize!"

But Petra had jumped up. Her chair clattered backwards. She was fleeing toward the door, and was crying shrilly, "You won't win! You take me to Prague — you won't win!"

In the door, she collided with Elinor, pressed past her, and ran upstairs to her room.

At a glance, Elinor took in the situation — the bulging veins on Joseph's forehead, the downward curve of Lida's mouth. "A victorious good morning!" she said and, laying her hand on Joseph's shoulder, kept him from rising. "My dear Joseph — at the beginning of what we hope will be a distinguished political career, let me give you a tip: Don't permit your

personal troubles to get into your public hair. And vice versa. Why let the child upset you? She's a sweet kid, and I like her."

She took her place, opened her eggs, dropped the yolk and the white in a cup and salted and peppered and stirred them. "Don't spoil my last days in Czechoslovakia! I came back here from Paris especially to watch your elections. That'll be my final story — and then back to New York!"

"It strikes me you could have seen more in Prague," remarked Lida, resenting the interference in her domestic affairs.

Elinor helped herself to a generous spoonful of her eggs and swallowed. "You should eat eggs, too!" she said. "Protein! Good for your complexion! . . . No, Lida, every second-rate stringer will be in Prague for this election; therefore, it will be conducted on the up-and-up. But here, in these small towns — that's where the story lies!"

"I don't see it," said Joseph.

Elinor stared at him. "Wake up, man! Those Communists are full of tricks! They won't suspect that an American correspondent is coming to Rodnik of all places --"

"You mean, our elections won't be fair?" Joseph laughed. "This isn't Russia, Elinor! Or Rumania, or Yugoslavia! We're a civilized country!"

"What's civilized about confiscating your Benda Works?"

Lida chimed in. "Joseph is naïve. And much too optimistic. He forgets that things aren't as they were before the war, when he would have won hands down."

"My Party has watchers in every polling place. There won't be any intimidation."

Elinor clucked her tongue. "I saw that poster! All I can say is that in America a man of your standing simply couldn't be lampooned the way you have been. The companies that control the billboard advertising wouldn't permit it."

Joseph smiled. "In America, it wouldn't be necessary for me to go into politics!"

"And then this ridiculous business of proportional representation, here!" Elinor went on. "Without that, your Communists would never have gotten to first base. The whole idea — stupid, time-consuming, and complicated! First you count all the votes, then you divide the total by the number of seats in the Assembly, then you apportion the seats in the districts so that every deputy represents the same number of people; then comes a second count and the left-over votes are distributed, and you end up with all the bad elements sitting in Parliament. If Dolezhal and your other friends had an ounce of brains, they would have introduced our election system. It's safer."

"Your system is safer," he said good-naturedly, "as long as you're certain

of a majority. But suppose the Communists in Rodnik won a majority — then all my votes would be lost. You wouldn't want that to happen, would you?"

Elinor didn't like the irony behind his explanation. "You Europeans have let matters get out of hand," she stated unequivocally. "Probably, the Communists not only have a chance of winning a majority, but they'll rig the whole election to swamp you."

"How can they rig it? I know almost every man and woman over eighteen in this town, I know how most of them will vote, and they know each other and know how they will vote. They got their ballots delivered to their homes weeks ago and have studied them and talked the whole thing over among themselves — " He shook his head. "Things are pretty bad, here; but I'm afraid your last story on Czechoslovakia will be that we had an honest election." And, thoughtfully, he added, "By God, I almost wish I could tell you differently."

He looked at his watch. "Have you finished, Elinor? I'd like to be at my polling place when it opens."

The polling place at which all the Bendas were to vote was located in the high school, a buff three-story building in need of a paint job, with high windows and a small clock tower from which the flag fluttered.

A considerable number of people were about, although it was not yet eight. Some wore the insignia of their Party in their buttonholes; all of them had on their Sunday best; a subdued holiday spirit was in the air. They stood in small groups, talking; at times their voices rose in argument, only to sink again to the level of measured conversation proper for such a civic occasion. Sergeant Ruziczka, the policeman on duty at the school gate, yawned. As long as the people talked outside, it was all right; once they had crossed the threshold of the polling place, he would permit no more electioneering. It would be an early day, probably; the pubs would be closed until evening, and there would be no drunks to be picked up as on other Sundays.

"How do you do, Mr. Benda?" he said, nodding gravely.

That was Thomas Benda, the great writer, and his pretty wife, come down from St. Nepomuk. In all likelihood, they would meet Mr. Joseph Benda, the candidate, right here and go in together. Mr. Joseph Benda would want to be the first one to vote this morning — get it over with, you know, early — and then sit and wait and fret all day. The trouble was that Professor Stanek, too, would vote at this polling place — it was his high school, after all! — and there would be a question as to who was to throw the first ballot into the box. As if it mattered!

Here came the other Benda brother, the doctor. Sergeant Ruziczka felt

a slight pain in his left groin. That was silly, of course; when there was no doctor around, there was no pain; it was really the doctors who made you think of being sick; but perhaps on his next day off he should drop into Dr. Benda's office, just for a checkup.

"All right! All right!" he said, stepping down from the stairs of the entrance gate onto the sidewalk. "Let's make some room here, folks!" Joseph Benda's big black car rolled down the street, slowed up, and was being parked in front of the school. He could have come on foot, thought Ruziczka; it would have been less trouble, and the people would have liked it better. But maybe he wants to do some traveling today, drive to the other towns in the district and take a look.

Somebody hooted. The policeman looked up sternly. The hooting ceased. Then there was scattered applause as Joseph Benda got out of his car and held the door for his wife, and their bony daughter with the big eyes, and for a woman who looked foreign, laughed loudly, and carried a large pig-skin pocketbook.

"Good morning, Mr. Benda!" said Sergeant Ruziczka, and opened the school gate. It was exactly eight o'clock.

Joseph was just about to enter the classroom in which the voting was to take place, when Professor Stanek came shuffling down the corridor. Thomas saw him first, saw him hesitate, and then turn back and disappear around a corner.

Elinor must have noticed him as well, for she shot a vicious glance at Thomas and said, "Doesn't dare show his face, does he?"

"You know the man?" Joseph asked Elinor. "That was my great opponent. . . ." He smiled. "Very nice of him not to create a scene. But we were here first."

"He could have beaten us to the punch," said Thomas. "He's got the keys to the school. He's probably been in his office for hours."

"Are you apologizing for him?" Lida bristled. Without waiting for an answer from Thomas she followed Joseph, who had pushed ahead into the classroom. Her superstitions were again aroused: Stanek had come on them like an apparition; why had he materialized in the corridor if not to cast some kind of evil eye on them, or at least to act as if he could do it?

Thomas found Lida's question too stupid to bother with. He was occupied with his own thoughts. Although Stanek, last night, never had asked him about his vote, the question had existed, and it was brought to the surface by the Professor's appearance in the corridor. Thomas had wanted to vote for his brother, and still wanted to. Even if Joseph had campaigned for 10 per cent beer, or against the obligation for men of the

better classes to wear neckties, Thomas would have wanted to vote for him. It was a matter of family pride; it was a kind of tribute to Joseph's courage in getting up and exposing his big chest to the fists of all sorts of people.

Something that was more decisive than Thomas suspected must have happened last night, if his mind tampered with a most natural and obvious routine today.

Kitty tapped him, "You're next!"

Startled, Thomas stepped forward. Joseph had already voted and was patiently leaning against a school bench. Lida, whose place had been ahead of Thomas, had gone into the booth; only her sturdy tan shoes and part of her nyloned legs stuck out from under a closed coarse curtain which screened off a corner of the classroom.

Thomas was faced by four men who sat at the large, square, ink-spotted teacher's desk.

"Mr. Thomas Benda?" the first one demanded.

"Yes, sir."

"Your voter's card, please."

Thomas fished through his pockets and brought out the small card which, along with his ballots, had been delivered to him by Sergeant Ruziczka.

The second man asked, "You are Mr. Thomas Benda of the house registered under Number 247 on St. Nepomuk Hill?"

"Yes, sir."

"You're thirty-one years of age, correct?"

"Correct."

The third man handed him a cheap envelope, and the fourth said, "You've got your ballots?"

"Yes," said Thomas, touching his coat pocket.

"You will select one of your five ballots, put it in the envelope, seal the envelope, and drop it into the slit of the box which you will find behind the curtain. You may take your time."

Thomas nodded. "I think I know the procedure."

The fourth man smiled. "We have to explain to every voter. It's the law."

Lida parted the curtain and emerged. Her face, worried before, was now broad with contentment. She had struck a blow, even if only a small one, in the right direction.

Thomas, passing Lida, felt her gaze: *You're on our side*, her eyes seemed to say, *I hope*. . . . Then he was alone; somebody behind him had pulled the curtain closed.

It was stuffy and smelly in this primitive cell — God knows from where they had taken the material for the curtain. The sharp light of the morn-

ing was shut out, and the dimness made it difficult to distinguish the printed matter on the ballots. After a few moments, however, Thomas was able to discern and read them. All five sheets had identical headings—the name and the number of the Limberk election district and the date, and, roughly stamped in the corner, the number of this polling place in Rodnik. Underneath the headings, each ballot was different. Four of them carried the name of a political party and the number assigned to it, and the slate of its candidates in the district, in the order of their preference. The fifth ballot was blank except for two heavy black lines crossing each other diagonally; this was the protest ballot for voters who liked none of the parties and wanted to say No to all of them.

Thomas scanned the ballots and chose the one of Joseph's Party. Dolezhal's name appeared first on its district slate. Evidently, the party organization had felt sure of electing at least one man in the Limberk district, and so had reserved the safe seat for its Minister and leading member. There followed another name, and then: JOSEPH BENDA. *Rodnik. National Administrator.*

Thomas toyed with the ballot. It was such a trifle—fold it once or twice, shove it into its envelope, drop it, finished. That's what freedom had boiled down to: the choice between some sheets of paper, every few years. After that you went home and had your dinner, and on Monday started work again as usual, leaving the power granted by your consent to the men on this list and to men who might not even have their names printed on it. There was good and sufficient reason for draping a curtain around you, so that those on the outside could not see you blush at the absurdity of the act.

He picked up the protest ballot with its diagonal bars, and studied it speculatively. Perhaps this was the answer. Fool Joseph, fool Stanek, fool them all, show up the folly of the whole rigmarole!

He folded the protest ballot and put it in the envelope and was just about to lick the cheap glue when he stopped. No, if the thing meant so little, why even trouble using it to satisfy a peeve? Why not give the vote to Joseph as you hand a coin to a beggar?

He changed ballots, sealed the flap, felt for the slit in the dark green wooden box, and let the envelope glide through. As he came out from behind the screen, holding it apart for Kitty to enter, he tore up his remaining four ballots and threw them into a wastebasket.

Elinor walked up to him, "Well, have you proved your independence?" Her tone was so belligerent that Joseph stirred from his pose.

"In there?" Thomas pointed at the curtain and shrugged. "Listen, I came here as a favor to Joseph—"

Joseph joined them. "What's up between you two?"

"Nothing!" Elinor poised her pencil to her notebook. "I wanted to know if Thomas voted for Stanek."

"Thomas? Are you joking?" Joseph put his arm around Thomas's shoulders. "Thomas is my boy. We may have our disagreements — haven't we?" — he smiled — "but his is one vote I can count on. If he didn't vote for me, I'd rather give up the race!"

Yet, a trace of suspicion remained on his face. It deepened as Thomas left him and as he heard Elinor query Karel, "And for whom will you vote, Doctor, if it's no secret?"

Karel had been trying to talk to Petra, without success, and had fallen to a silent contemplation of her morose expression.

"Pardon, Miss Simpson?"

"For whom will you vote?"

"In our country, Miss Simpson, the vote is secret."

"Ah," she said, "so you're not voting for your brother?"

"Next!" called an election official.

"Excuse me," said Karel and went to the curtain. He encountered Kitty on her way out and stepped aside to avoid touching her.

Selecting the ballot of his choice took him no more than a few seconds. His hair brushed against the top part of the curtain as he ducked out of the improvised voting booth. Irrked, he smoothed it back.

"Well!" Joseph exclaimed, "the family seems to have done its duty!" Nudging Karel genially, he said under his breath, "Whom did you vote for, really?"

Karel thought of the goulash soup, of Joseph's ambitions which were becoming all too plain — but also of Joseph coming to meet him in Prague, of Joseph's inept attempts to make Petra or anyone love him.

"Do you honestly want to know, Joseph?"

"Certainly!"

Joseph was leading with his chin. Or was he unable to conceive that circumstances could arise under which brother would not support brother? Karel said, "I'd rather not tell you —"

"I insist!"

"I voted for Stanek."

Joseph turned away sharply. He heard Lida bid Karel a frosty *Gutenby*, heard Karel leave, and, far in the background, the low murmur of the election business going on. Then he gathered up Petra. It was his public voice which announced, "In a few years from now, Petra darling, you'll be able to vote for me, too!"

Perhaps it was this remark, meant as a joke and falling like a dud, which decided Thomas to remain at Joseph's side. The subsequent rushing about

cept him from determining which was the predominant among the various motives whose sum total caused him to endure the company of Elinor's and Lida's company. It could have been that Joseph, working under pressure and against odds, lost some of the self-centeredness he had imagined giant's aura, and that this kindled in Thomas a flickering attachment to his brother; it could have been that Karel's bold departure from the family, for which Thomas had not had the courage, drove him to seek justification for his own wavering; or simply that he felt a desire to balance the previous evening with Stanek by a day with Joseph.

He told Joseph, "If you've got room in your car, I'd like to come along — as an observer. Practical test, you know" — he laughed — "of my abstract ideas."

Joseph welcomed him frankly, accepting the rationale without question. He restacked the party pamphlets with which the car was loaded, so that the auxiliary seats could be opened for Thomas and Kitty; Petra rode with him in front, her discomfort increased by having half a dozen big bundles under her feet; Lida and Elinor held the rear seat like a fortress walled by last-minute election material.

So they set out, from town to village to town. Thomas couldn't help being impressed by Joseph's stubborn pluck — Joseph was trying to rally support by his presence, giving encouragement to his party workers with a few well-chosen words, exerting the power of his personality to cement morale, leaving the packages of campaign literature with the local leaders, appealing, handshaking, cajoling, being witty, keeping up a front.

Outside of Rodnik, Joseph's personal influence was needed. The organizational weight of his opponents could be felt almost physically. The welcomes he received from the people on the street were thinner and less cordial, the crowds less receptive, the faces less friendly. There could be no doubt that the Communists were the better and more experienced organizers; they had built their campaign around issues rather than personalities. The weakness of Stanek as a spellbinder became his strength when his principles were stated not by himself in his lecturing way, but in simple terms by a man, a neighbor or fellow worker. Joseph's and Dolezhal's party organization, based mostly on sugar bakers and tailors and grocery shop owners and small town officials and small-town lawyers, lacked the cohesiveness and the dynamism of the Communists'. The Communist machine, elections or no, was greased and running by its year-around activities inside the civic centers, the factories. Its members had sucked in the collective action with the milk flowing meagerly from the thin teats of their mothers.

That was the situation as Joseph explained it between stops. That Joseph was so calm and sober and coolly analytical on this day of reckoning,

when Thomas had expected him to be fidgety and upset, changed the pigeon dirt of which his feet allegedly consisted to pretty solid stuff.

"In the villages, of course," Joseph said, "it will be different from the towns with their glass factories and textile mills. The defeat of the Nazis and the land reform gave many of these peasants a piece of ground. Now they're deathly afraid that the Communists will take it away again, as in Russia, and communize the land and the cattle and the women and everything."

He snorted.

"I wish there were as many farmers as there are workers."

They stopped in a number of villages. Elinor went to look at the polling places which were mostly inside pubs. The aged wood of their deserted bars shone dark and warm in the sunlight filtering through the small windows; the planked floors were white from sand and scrubbing.

Joseph had a way with the tongue-tied farmers and their wives. Despite his citified clothes, he could look like a peasant, himself, and with him they opened up and told him of their troubles and their fears, and he didn't even have to make promises to them. He was simply himself and seemed to be glad of it, Thomas noted; the farmers did not want to let him go, and it took Lida to keep him to his schedule.

In the early afternoon, they arrived in Limberk. At the office of his Party, across the square from the city hall, Joseph and his entourage were received with optimistic smiles and glad handshakes. After listening to his report of his tour of inspection and stimulation, the ward heelers became somewhat less ebullient and pointed out carefully that, even with a good vote in Limberk and Rodnik and in the villages, it would take a lot of effort to get three candidates elected from this district.

Thomas observed his brother. Joseph's broad face remained thoughtful, but serene; he said no more to the ward heelers — instead, he went to the door, asked in the newsmen who had been waiting outside the inner office, and made to them the unqualified statement that he would be elected and that his Party would roll up a decisive victory in the Limberk district and throughout the country.

Then he led the way back to his car. At the corner next to the Party Headquarters, he saw the billboard pillar. He halted. He called to the reporters from whom he had just parted and, winking at Elinor, said, "Gentlemen — I want to pose for a picture." He placed himself squarely in front of the poster with the pig-faced capitalist, overrode the hesitation of the photographer with a guffaw, and ordered, "Shoot!"

"But, sir!"

"I want it that way. If I win, *they* will look ridiculous; if I lose, what more can I lose?"

It was a good show of defiance. Thomas, with his sense for the dramatic, enjoyed it to the full, felt outgoing, and included Elinor in his remark, "He's got imagination, hasn't he?"

Elinor ignored him, as she had through most of the trip, and said loudly: "I want a copy of the picture! It'll be sensational in the Sunday section."

As the evening wore on, it was Lida who kept everybody going. She's like a pack mule, thought Thomas; the rest of us are ready to fall on our faces.

Lida unflaggingly served drinks and refreshments to the party workers dropping over from their Rodnik headquarters to report to Joseph. She talked to them when Joseph lapsed into depressed silence. And as she had trimmed and pruned and tied down Joseph's hopes in the morning, so now she was nursing his wilting belief in himself and his success.

The first local returns from Rodnik had been excellent. Joseph and his Party were running slightly ahead of Stanek and the Communists, better than expected. But as the figures from the workers' quarters came in, the lead shrunk and Stanek nosed ahead — in Joseph's own bailiwick!

Petra sat on a stool next to the radio, a vicious imp with a grin on her face. Joseph had wanted to send her to bed, but Elinor and Kitty objected — how often in the child's life was her father a candidate for so high an office? Thomas was conscious of the antagonism between father and child; it didn't concern him and he dismissed it as trivial. The spirit of a race, implicit in any election, began to get hold of him as the national results at first trickled and later poured out of the radio. On the basis of preliminary calculations, so the announcer said, it would take some twenty-four thousand votes to seat one member of the Assembly. With not quite 15 per cent of the vote counted in the Limberk district by 8:30 at night, it looked as if Dolezhal's Party would be able to seat two men from there.

Joseph was the third. Petra wiggled on her stool. She was saying nothing, but her large eyes gleamed.

Kitty called to her, "Sit over here on the sofa with me!" She took Petra's cold and clammy hands in her own. "Don't take it to heart, Petra! Your father will win yet!"

Petra broke into a strident laugh.

"In another half-hour, you *will* go to bed!" Lida declared. But she was immediately distracted by the arrival of a group of men bringing new returns. The villages surrounding Rodnik were coming through, and Joseph's Party was again leading by a slim margin.

Joseph was chain smoking. The ash tray next to him was crowded with butts. Elinor said she was positive that the Communists had pulled off

something. If she were able to speak the language and mix with the people, she was sure she would have the evidence. Joseph was tiredly fending her off.

"You would have won, if it weren't for that!" she cried.

"He will win," Lida said firmly. Her eyes were steely, and Thomas knew she was furious.

He pitied Joseph profoundly. For his brother's sake, he wished that Joseph had never entered the race; and he feared for himself, for his essay — there would be a night, sometime, when he would be just as alone, having staked everything on one effort, and, like Joseph, would be waiting for a decision over which he had no influence.

The reports were coming in fast now, partly over the radio, partly from the messengers. Joseph had a pad of paper on his lap, and was computing tallies and scores. He did not announce his results. Twice already he had walked to the telephone and lifted the receiver, only to place it back, softly, on its cradle. Now he called Prague.

A hush fell over the crowded room.

"Minister Dolezhal?"

Joseph stubbed out his cigarette.

"All right —" he said. "So you are satisfied? . . . Fine, we're doing fine here, too."

But his tone belied his words.

"Thank you. . . . I will call you back if anything surprising should happen. . . . You will call me? . . . Very good, sir. . . . Good night, sir. . . ."

He went back to his chair. His face was set, and he said sharply, "For the last time, Petra! You go to bed!" Thomas could see what effort it was for him to keep his eyes and his lips under control.

The voice over the radio broke in:

At 10:30 at night, with approximately 35 per cent of the vote counted, it is fairly certain that the Limberk district has elected Minister Bohumil Dolezhal and one additional candidate on his slate. There might be, however, a considerable number of votes left over, which will be apportioned to another candidate.

Petra smiled and kissed Kitty and Thomas good night. Then, like a well-bred child, she tripped over to her father and kissed him on the cheek. Lida grabbed her hand and took her out of the room.

By eleven o'clock, the party workers ceased coming. They were tired after a long day; most of the Rodnik votes had been counted, and Joseph was no longer of importance.

Elinor yawned. "Well, Thomas, you've demonstrated your loyalty. Now you can drop it and go home."

Thomas made no move. After a while, he said gently, "Joseph, remember those nights in January 1939? Remember how we sat and listened to the radio and waited and hoped —"

"The farm vote," said Joseph; "that will be coming in all night."

Lida had returned. She was cleaning up the debris the party workers had left — glasses with dregs of stale beer, empty coffee cups, plates with crumbs and smeared traces of chocolate icing.

Kitty got up to help her.

"Thank you, don't," said Lida. "I manage better alone. The maid's in the kitchen, anyhow."

"The farm vote," said Joseph, "and certain precincts in Limberk." He stopped himself. "This is crazy! What am I doing? Why am I eating my heart out?"

"You will win!" Lida said quietly. "I know it."

Kitty was thinking of Karel. Where was he sitting now? Where was he listening to the radio? Alone, at home, at the wax-cloth-covered table? Or with Stanek and Kravat and others of their kind? It was wrong of her to think of Karel at this moment; it was wrong of Karel not to be here. Whatever he felt politically — at this hour, his place was here, with the family. Her body ached and her head ached. Everything was wrong.

At 11:30, the announcer's voice said unemotionally, the Communists in the Limberk district have elected three deputies . . .

"That means Stanek is in," said Joseph. "Comfortably."

Thomas dried his moist palms on his handkerchief. And I had him at the house last night, he thought. It *was* disloyal. Elinor is right.

"Stanek?" asked Elinor.

"Has been elected," said Joseph.

"That's the proof!" she asserted. "Who would vote for that fuddlehead?"

Joseph stood up, the shadows of weariness purple under his eyes. He looked from Thomas and Kitty to Elinor and to his wife. "You've been very helpful to me, all day and all evening. It was a hard day, and so I'm going to send you to bed."

There was protest from Kitty, from Lida.

"I want to be alone — don't you understand?"

The last Thomas saw of him, he was sitting, bent forward, jotting figures on the pad on his knee, his square head outlined by the rays of his reading lamp.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

"**AND I TELL YOU, I forbid it!**" said Karel. "Even if my brother has ordered it — I am the doctor! I forbid it!"

Kravat stood facing him, shapeless and heavy in pull-overs, an old Army greatcoat, and sackcloth drenched in kaolin. He stared at Karel with inflamed eyes. His gloved hand moved down the shawl he had twisted over his nose, chin, and throat, "What do you want here? This isn't your day at the Works!"

"I just heard of this madness. Where's your sense, man! It's more than three hundred centigrade inside that furnace —"

Karel stopped. Out of the manhole that had been broken under the platform into the furnace, a worker came creeping. His face was invisible behind its burlap mask, only his eyes, red and strained, looked up at Karel. Two other men helped him to his feet. The layers of cloth around him could not hide the heaving of his chest. For a couple of seconds, the man stood still; then, dazed and encumbered by his gear, he moved off to one side, his hands still clutching a large, thickly encrusted black brick.

Karel hurried after him. It was as if in his mind a strip of motion pictures were being reeled off backwards: the manhole, the silent furnace, the lumps of patient men, combined in a harrowing image.

The worker, suddenly regaining his full senses, dropped the brick, and a dull laugh sounded from under his wrappings.

"Your hands!" said Karel.

The man held them out.

Karel stripped off the two pairs of gloves and felt the worker's pulse. His eyes narrowed.

A group of men, each one a ragpicker's dream in his numerous casings of ancient winter clothes, had lumbered up and gathered around Karel and the worker.

Kravat was calling sharply, "What's going on over there! I want none of that horsing around today! The quicker we work, the quicker we'll be through!"

Karel broke his way through the circle surrounding him and marched back to Kravat. He was loaded with anger. Joseph had pulled another fast one. But how had Joseph got Kravat and all these men, who knew what this job meant, to agree? Why were they taking chances when they could just as well wait a few days and repair the furnace in safety?

Kravat had pushed his wool cap off his head and looked a little like a deep-sea diver without helmet. Joined by the furnace foreman, he awaited Karel with a thin smile around his grimy mouth.

"The pulse was all right?" he asked.

"No, it was not," said Karel.

The smile vanished; Kravat appeared troubled.

Karel let loose. "You could have had the decency to tell me you were planning this! But you were afraid I'd stop it. And I'm going to!"

"You've been around the glass industry!" Kravat defended himself. "You know we do these things —"

"Yes, I know," said Karel. The harrowing image spread beyond the furnace and the men, and extended to a black tail coat and himself cutting into it, tearing it into shreds. "Old Matjey . . ." he mumbled.

"Did you say something?"

Karel collected himself. "I mean — perhaps those methods were necessary when you had a boss who drove you because he lost profits every day the furnace was shut down. All I want to find out is: Who is responsible for this? Joseph? Or you?"

"We need production just as much as when there was a boss around," Kravat said uncertainly. Had Joseph roped him into this, after all? No — he, himself, had pushed for the quick and dangerous method. Dangerous? Nonsense! A man went into the furnace and held his breath and stayed a few seconds, ripped out one of the damaged bricks, and came out again. Nothing to it!

"But Dr. Benda!" said the foreman. "My father did it that way and my grandfather before him, and they lived to be old men."

"Your father! Your grandfather!" scoffed Karel. "Your father and grandfather put leeches on their skin! Now we use sulfa. Your father and grandfather ate meat once a week, if they were lucky and had work! Now we aim to eat meat every day. Can you live with one leg in socialism, and the other in the Middle Ages? If you were in such a hurry with the furnace, why didn't you get asbestos suits?"

He had talked himself into a beautiful rage. And it wasn't because of their backwardness and their stubbornness, but because they were in league with Joseph. If he could have pinned the blame on Joseph, he would have felt easier and would have known what to do. But he could not fight everybody at the same time.

"Asbestos suits?" asked the foreman, his tone indicating that, since his father and his grandfather had not used them, how should he think of such gadgets?

"We haven't got them," Kravat stated tersely. "But that has nothing to do with the case. We must produce so that in a few years, maybe, we *will*

have asbestos suits, and a lot of other things, too. We must build socialism with what we have."

The workers were crawling in and out of the inhuman heat of the furnace, one after the other, each one carrying out one brick in his hands. They were breaking down the damaged grating piece by piece; and they would rebuild it piece by piece. Their eyes were not burned out of their sockets only because their tear ducts worked overtime and the tears, drying up continuously, cooled the sclerotic in the process.

Karel looked at the gaping hole in the furnace and at these men whom he wanted to stop. He sensed how much of an outsider he was to them, his demands without significance, his interference tolerantly shrugged off.

If he told them that he refused to be answerable for the consequences of their decision, it would mean nothing. Nor would it mean anything if he proceeded to shout about their ruining their health and risking their lives because, to them, all this was rationalized with the word "accident," and accidents were unavoidable. And if he spoke of their responsibility to themselves and the future, for which their lives were of some importance, they would thank him for his advice and point to the furnace and say: Please let us get on with our work.

And couldn't it be that he was wrong? It was not just the doctor in him fighting against their barbaric technique; it went back to a trauma of his childhood, and he had no right to set an old nightmare against their daily needs.

"You should have let me know. . . ." he said emptily.

"Next time we will!" promised Kravat. "Next time we'll build better; next time, maybe, we'll have asbestos suits; next time, who knows, we'll be able to control the slag or to control the weather!"

He pulled down his cap and over it the sackcloth soaked in kaolin. It was his turn to go into the furnace.

For a while, Karel waited around. The most he could do was to keep in readiness in case any of the men needed his assistance.

He was hungry. It had been shortly after six in the morning when he had been called to the home of a worker whose child had pneumonia. He had done everything to make the little thing comfortable, and he had told the father to stay home from work and help.

Was it that critical? the man had wanted to know; he had to be at the Works.

So Karel had learned of the furnace and of the repair job due to be started. He had rushed to the Works. He was a fool to show his concern.

"Hello, Karel!"

A grating voice.

Joseph had come in, unannounced, ungreeted. He was unshaven and jowly and old and looked as if he had hardly slept.

Karel included the furnace in a gesture of reproach. "I had an argument with Kravat."

"So he told me," said Joseph. "I'm sorry."

He sounded beaten.

"If you look at it objectively," he went on, shrugging his shoulders, "perhaps I shouldn't have permitted it. But the men themselves demanded it. And in my situation I felt I couldn't afford a long shutdown."

"Because of the elections?"

Joseph's eyes became guarded. "No, not that," he said hesitantly. "You can understand that a former owner as manager is in a precarious position."

"I guess so," agreed Karel. Everybody was acting under his own compulsions, his own laws. It was as if there were no longer a freedom of sensible decision.

"It's all the same now — " Joseph resumed. He did not finish. He was too tired to be caustic.

"You lost?"

"Haven't you heard?"

"I had no chance to read a paper. I had an emergency this morning, and then I came here. . . . The men told me nothing. Somehow, the furnace is life, votes are abstract."

"We got sixty-five thousand votes in the district," said Joseph. "It was good, but not enough." He grimaced, and called, "Kravat!"

Kravat came.

"Tell one of the men to strip," Joseph ordered, "and make it a tall one. I don't want to be pinched under the armpits when I go in."

"You're going in?" asked Karel.

"Of course!"

"Let me give you a quick checkup, first."

"Nonsense!" said Joseph. "Did you examine any of the others?"

"How could I?"

"Then don't bother about me."

A man took off his array of protective rags; Karel watched his brother put them on one by one. Joseph was slow and deliberate, every move seemed to pain him. Finally, he towered there in his sackcloth, his face tired and quiet. It was to Karel as if he were trying to atone for something.

Joseph got in line with the men waiting their turn. His dilapidated armor was unwieldy and uncomfortable; but it would protect his body against the worst of the heat. He moved his limbs to adjust the clothes; yet he could not make himself feel at ease. In the end he had to acknowledge

that what was bothering him was neither the weight nor the smell of the clothes — they smelled a little like burned potatoes; the cause of his vexation was an indistinct sensation of fear, which became sharp and physically painful the moment he realized its existence. I'm an ass, he scolded himself, a sentimental ass; after last night, I should be in bed and asleep. But he had given a promise — a pre-election pledge nobody, including himself, had taken seriously, and which had been made all the more futile by the outcome of the contest.

The queue in front of him grew shorter with frightening speed. One following the other, the men dove into the furnace and, not half a minute later, emerged again, their stint done. Joseph's throat was dry, his tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth, and his lips felt as if they were corrugated. He recognized the man immediately before him, although he was looking at him only now. He recognized the bent shoulders which under the disguise had almost ceased being shoulders.

"Blaha!" he said. "How are things?"

"Good, sir! Excellent, sir!" came the muffled answer.

"You've been in there already?"

"Once, sir."

"With your hands?"

"They're all right for this kind of thing, I guess."

"It's hot in there, isn't it?"

There was a brief pause. Then Blaha said, "Well — once you are in, you don't feel it so much."

"Do me a favor, will you, Blaha?"

"Certainly."

"I — I promised I would help you people with this. But I haven't got much time. Let me go in ahead of you -- "

Cloaked by the sacks, Blaha's nod was hardly noticeable. But he moved to switch places with Joseph. And there was the furnace, looming larger than Joseph had ever seen it, and a man came crawling out, and Joseph stooped to help him up.

This is it, thought Joseph. The sweat trickled and itched on the back of his neck, but maybe that was because every man's eyes were directed at him and concentrating on the back of his neck. He forced himself down on his knees, pulled tight his mask, closed his eyes, and crept forward.

Ah, Blaha had lied! The heat was all-engulfing, all-overpowering, seizing him in a giant, soft, scorching grip. Pins were being stuck into his naked eyes, and his eyeballs were turning into glowing lead bullets. He could not breathe, he would not breathe; he knew, not with his brain, but with the instinct of his nerves, that his lungs would be scalded if he dared breathe in this smoldering air. He wanted to crawl out, but even some-

thing as simple as forward and backward was too complicated to think about. He did not think. Thinking was a waste of time. There was only one leitmotif: Every second in here would bring his brain closer to the bursting point.

He saw nothing. Except that the nothing began to take shape. Somewhere a dim, wavering light shimmered in the immense heat. With an effort that made the pumping of his heart jump to his ears, he righted himself on his knees, hit his head against something, his hands went out groping. Through his gloves, he could feel a looseness; he pulled and tugged, but the thing wouldn't give.

How much time had gone by? Perhaps he was in here too long, perhaps in another second his lungs would boil and his heart fail and the heat would wither him. He felt himself grow panicky and knew that panic was the end. He bit his tongue until the pain of the bite was greater than the pain that came from the swelling of his brain against his skull.

One more tug — his last strength, his last reserve of breath went into it. Then the thing gave, he held it in his hand, he grabbed it tight as if it were gold, or the relic of a saint, or a new life.

How he got out, he never knew. His next conscious moment came when he heard his own voice — a strange voice, but he knew it was his own — say, "Water — water, please — thank you --" and heard himself slurping, and felt the cool wet run down his gullet. A jagged piece of brick was in his hand, and somebody took it away from him and laughed.

Joseph, too, started to laugh. He brushed the sack and the woolen cap off his head, and laughed, and said, "Jesus!" and breathed deeply, deliciously.

"Your wife is here," he heard the furnace foreman say.

The haze before Joseph's eyes was clearing away only slowly. Through it, he now saw Lida, ridiculously slim and correct in her high-necked blouse and the conservative dark of her suit, a miniature compared to the hulking, clumsy company in the furnace hall.

She was coming closer. Except for those whose turn in the furnace was coming next, the men let their curiosity get the better of them and tried to be as near to Lida and Joseph as possible, crowding her with their stench. But she was much too excited to object, and the news she was bringing would gain in impact because of the audience.

"Good morning, Mr. Deputy!" she said.

Joseph pressed his lids tight to remove the blur from his vision. When he opened his eyes again, he suddenly saw his wife as sharply focused as on an unflattering photograph. What had she been saying?

She kept on coming toward him with open arms. His protective clothes were still steaming and sticky with the kaolin and caked with the filth

and the dust and the particles of breakage that had been inside the furnace. She could not embrace him.

But her face showed a triumphant radiance which silenced the men and made them stop grinning.

"Congratulations, Mr. Deputy!" she said, emphasizing each word.

"Deputy?" he said. "Deputy . . ."

"They called from Prague. Minister Dolezhal called. It happened on the second count. They assigned you the surplus votes from some other districts."

Though still benumbed from the stay in the furnace and off balance from the unexpected news, he felt the fact sink in and felt himself begin to cope with it. Already the strain of struggle, the agony of waiting, the pain of defeat, the penance in the furnace, seemed less heavy, and the exhilaration of victory set in — indeed, strain, agony, pain, and penance had been a necessary conditioning without which the victory would have been shallow.

"Long live Deputy Benda!" somebody cried raucously, and the call was taken up by several workers.

Joseph straightened and glanced around. Work was going on at the furnace, and that was as it should be. His brother Karel was keeping himself aloof somewhere, which was unnecessary because this was a time to forgive and forget. Tears were on Lida's cheeks, and the faces of the men around were expectant.

"Speech!" hollered the same raucous voice.

Joseph laughed and shook his head. He felt flushed and a little faint; the sleepless night, the morning's exertion, the shock, were catching up with him. He wanted to tear off the borrowed rags and the sackcloth; but he decided against it. Cincinnatus had been chosen from the plow. He was being called from the furnace.

"Doctor!"

The cry pierced everything.

Within a second, Joseph found himself standing alone but for Lida whose horror-dilated eyes followed the men. He stood motionless, knowing everything that had happened, knowing it down to its last detail although the massed backs of his workers hid from him furnace and body and doctor and all.

Then he pushed himself forward, elbowing aside whatever barred his way.

Before the manhole broken into the furnace knelt Kravat, holding on his lap the half naked, strangely bent and shrunken figure of a man. Kravat's long, grief-stricken face was lowered so close to the other's that Joseph was unable to see whose it was. Or perhaps something in him re-

fused to admit that he knew those warped hands and those shoulders.

Karel, who had been working over the body, got up. He rolled up the rubber tubes of his stethoscope and in a cracked voice ordered, "Stretcher! And a blanket . . ."

"It's Blaha?" asked Joseph.

"Yes."

"Dead?"

Karel did not look at his brother. "Quite."

Mechanically, Joseph began to strip off the clothes he had worn in the furnace. "We must take care of his children," he said. It sounded fatuous.

Kravat still knelt like a statue, but his face, stiff and distorted, had come up. Ashamed of their gaping at death, the men turned from Kravat and the corpse, and inched back.

Karel's throat was choking; his finger tips still retained the feel of the bony body aged before its time and unnaturally hot from the furnace in which it had ceased functioning.

His mind was a wasp nest of useless thoughts and too-late's. In concentration camp he had learned that death was not the chooser. . . . Would Blaha be alive if I, the doctor, the man, had done what I should have? Would they have stopped the hasty repair of the furnace if I had shouted more loudly and insisted more stubbornly? Would Joseph have made any different decision if I had publicly condemned him? Would another manager have run the plant in another way if I had thought of using my contact with Novak to get Joseph out of the job?

I am guilty, and Joseph is, and Kravat is, and the men themselves are, together with their fathers and their grandfathers. But Joseph most of all, because he is the only one who has gained by Blaha's death. Just as my father was guilty of old Matjey's.

"What a price to pay, Mr. Deputy," said Karel.

Joseph flinched.

"His heart gave out," Karel went on, remorseless against himself as much as against Joseph. "He was bent, and he had crippled hands, and he went in, and with those hands of his, he tried to break loose a brick — and tried — and tried."

Joseph pressed his fists against his temples.

"Look at him, Mr. Deputy! Look at him the way he lies there. I hope you'll never forget him. I hope he'll ride your conscience to hell and gone!"

"Don't blame me!" Joseph roared. "Blame yourself! You're the doctor! Blame Kravat! He agreed to everything! Blame that damned socialism of yours that forces men to do more than they can!"

"Joseph!" Lida chided shrilly. "In front of the men —"

"I liked Blaha," said Joseph. "I'm the only one who ever did anything for him. A man who wouldn't hurt a fly . . ."

"So you killed him. Because your furnace mustn't get cold, because your glass must be made —"

"It isn't my furnace! It isn't my glass!"

It wasn't Joseph's furnace, Karel thought, and it wasn't his glass, and it wasn't his fault. But whose fault was it?

"There was a time," he said slowly, "when I should have stood up and spoken up. About you, Joseph — about your having the nerve to want to become a leader — a leader of the people —"

He didn't care who heard him or how widely this got around. This was no family quarrel. This was bigger than the family, bigger than three brothers of the same blood, bigger than the Bendas and Rodnik.

"You're a fraud, Joseph! You gave Blaha a job because you wanted to be popular. You wanted to be popular because you wanted to get elected. You wanted to get elected because you want this furnace back for yourself, and only for yourself, and no one else!"

"That's a lie!" Joseph's voice carried through the whole hall. He would have thrown himself at Karel, but some of the men stepped in between them, and the stretcher-bearers were coming.

"Kravat!" said Karel. "Get up!"

He and Kravat placed Blaha on the stretcher and covered him. Two men gripped the ends of the stretcher and lifted it. Karel walked alongside it, away from the broken furnace, through the hall which had been his youth, out through the doorway and into the sunlight of the yard.

Involuntarily, he closed his eyes.

The whole matter was thoroughly bad. Brother was set against brother, as he had predicted; but who was he to condemn Joseph, with the blood of Blaha on his own hands as well? Poor Blaha — thin ribs and a wizened old face, and the smell of burning still on him.

Karel opened his eyes. They could bear the light now, and things fell back into perspective. Accidents happen. Work goes on. The smokestack must smoke, and fire must burn, and men must blow glass and learn from their experiences.

He saw Joseph come out of the furnace hall. Lida walked ahead, as if leading him. Joseph held himself upright, his broad shoulders squared once more to the tasks he had set himself.

Karel looked at the covered heap on the stretcher and back at Joseph. He had no feeling of hate for his brother; he had no feeling for him at all.

Second Book

F R E E D O M

CHAPTER ONE

"THE CHAIR recognizes Deputy Bendal"

Joseph got up from his seat in the back rows of the Chamber. He had had ample time since his election — a year and a half, it was now — to prime himself for this day and this hour. Deliberately, he collected the papers on his desk. He was well documented — he had statistics on the frequencies of industrial accidents and other causes of disabilities, budgetary estimates, letters from unions, a treatise on job retraining prepared by the Institute for Occupational Diseases of the Medical Faculty at Charles University. When he was sure that all of his material was in order, he walked down the aisle toward the rostrum.

In passing, he saw the half-empty benches of the House, the golden tone of their blond wood speckled with the blacks and grays and dark browns of the backs of his fellow deputies; and he smiled at his own tenseness. There was no need for it. The deputies sat in varying attitudes of relaxation or boredom behind their small, slanted desks so like the children's benches in school. Some of them had before them a printed copy of the bill he was going to submit; they knew it was a routine social measure covering a relatively small aspect of the field; and they were probably hoping that in moving the bill he would not indulge in too much rhetoric so that they could get out in good time for lunch.

Joseph knew the feeling; he had shared it when one of them rose to speak on measures and motions most of which were unlikely to shake the earth. Not that he had become a cynic — the game of politics was too fascinating to permit him to develop the sense of aloofness necessary for cynicism; but he had learned to hold his horses. In the beginning, it had been difficult. His maiden speech had been a verbal onslaught of major proportions, and his chagrin had been great when he discovered that his oration, far from propelling the world or even his own country toward the high purposes of his Party and himself, had netted only a few lines in his Party's press; the other papers disregarded it completely. Teaching him

patience and discipline and the rules of procedure had taken a lot of coaching from Minister Dolezhal and from the foxy Deputy Feldstyn, who was unofficial head of the Party's parliamentary club and its whip on the floor.

Now Joseph was a seasoned parliamentarian, known in the Chamber as a close henchman of Dolezhal's, though with a freshness of approach and some independent ideas that set him apart from the run-of-the-mill hacks. There was absolutely no reason for him to be tense. It was ridiculous; but it was always that way with him — despite all the coaching, he never had been able to get rid of the idea that from this bare rostrum, almost monastic in its simplicity, he was addressing the whole nation.

To reach the podium, he had to parade by the elevated row of seats reserved for the Cabinet. Only the Minister of Posts was present — probably got through early selling stamps, thought Joseph, laughing nervously to himself — and the Minister of Social Welfare, who would have to administer the provisions of the bill if it ever became law, and who therefore was interested. The Speaker gave Joseph a slight, indifferent nod. Then Joseph found himself at the lectern from which he was to address the House.

He looked upwards, beyond the Speaker, at the Czech lion, its raised claws, its split tongue thrust out. *Truth Will Prevail*, it said underneath the heraldic animal. Joseph Benda turned, shuffled his papers, spread them out, and faced the Chamber.

"I want to talk to you of a man who is now dead," he began.

The trembling of his fingers ceased, and he observed that his unusual opening had taken effect. The stenographers were paying attention, and the heads of some of the deputies were being raised.

"His name was Otakar Blaha, and if, as it sometimes happens, the name of a man should be attached to the bill I have the honor to submit, then I wish that it carry his. Because he was a worker, a simple worker, in the plant of which I am the National Administrator."

The mention of the fact that the dead man had been a worker caused a slight stir on the Left. It was somewhat unusual that a member of Dolezhal's Party should stress that angle.

Joseph had counted on that.

"If the death of a man makes any sense," he went on, "it is that we, the survivors, learn from the lessons of his life. Do you know what Grinder's Hand is? Well, let me explain it to you. . . ."

Joseph worked out his speeches carefully. The rule of the House was that speeches, except for quotes from documents and tables, were not to be read; so Joseph rehearsed his in front of the full-length mirror in his room in the Esplanade, watching and studying his facial expressions, and forcing himself to use his hands sparingly because he didn't want to have it

said that he was aping Dolezhal's short, pointed, stabbing motions. Once his words began to roll, his address unraveled itself almost automatically, and part of his mind was set free to supervise his delivery, to gauge the reactions of his audience, and occasionally to go off on dreams of its own.

As he explained the effect of Grinder's Hand, as he told of the hardships suffered by men who, through no fault of their own, could no longer exercise the skills they had perfected in years of training, the face of Blaha rose before him: wrinkled prematurely by the strain of concentrated work; the nearsighted, ineffectual eyes; the horribly shrunken mask it had worn in death.

In a way I'm paying a debt, Joseph thought. He wanted no glory out of this bill, and it wasn't the kind of bill that would help him or his Party to attain their ends — though it might provide a minor argument for the next elections. It was a humanitarian, noncontroversial measure due to receive the blessings of the Right as well as the Left; something which everybody could feel good about and which was really needed.

He went on to outline that a man incapacitated on his job must be enabled to find another with equal pay, and that the society for which he had worked owed him the differential between his old scale and the wages he would receive while learning his new craft.

He quoted his statistics and outlined the methods for financing the proposition. Part of the social insurance taxes could easily be diverted to pay this differential, particularly since the worker, once his full earning capacity was restored, would contribute by his higher taxes a proportionately larger amount to the general fund.

With the reading of his figures the human interest he had touched off began to die down. Only the Minister for Social Welfare was making casual notes, probably so as to be able to make some sort of additional recommendation.

Joseph himself was bored with this part of his speech, but he had to cover the financial angle. No bill involving expenditures could be submitted without the proponent stating exactly how much money would be needed and from where the funds were to come. This rule eliminated a lot of demagogic appeals to special-interest groups; on the other hand, it made for a certain dryness of debate.

"*Annual Appropriation*," he read, "*First Estimate*: seventy-eight point six million crowns for the budgetary year of 1948, to be reduced by three point one million crowns during 1949 and 1950, with proviso for general revision of needs for the budgetary years 1951 and following . . ."

It was the idea of this bill, he thought, which had led him into this Assembly and brought him to this rostrum. He remembered the day exactly — how he had stepped into Lida's office at Vesely's and had found

Kravat there, and Karel, and Blaha of the crippled hands, who now was dead; how he had blunted the edge of Kravat's threats, and fended off Karel, and begun to speak in terms of this new welfare ideology which was a millstone on the neck of every businessman but necessary to prevent worse to come; and how, all of a sudden, he had seen that Dolezhal's suggestion that he get into politics had been no whimsy. If Blaha, God rest his soul, had not for fifteen years leaned on his elbows, no Deputy Joseph Benda would be standing up here in the white, glaring light of this high-ceilinged, illustrious hall which once had been the stock exchange.

He was through with the arithmetic now, thank goodness. Shoving his papers together, he stole a secret glance at his wrist watch. Ten minutes to twelve — it could not be said that he was unduly imposing on his colleagues.

He lifted his face and looked squarely at the benches.

"And so I urge you, honored fellow members, to uncover the possible weaknesses in this proposed bill for the payment of Government subsidies to workers incapacitated on their job and the financing of their training for a new one. Improve the bill wherever possible, by all means — because nothing is perfect —"

He stopped for a second. Deputy Feldstyn, his sharp, pockmarked face stretched forward birdlike as always, had come rushing into the Chamber and was beginning hasty whispered conferences with some of the key members of Dolezhal's Party.

It confused Joseph. Obviously, some emergency had arisen; otherwise Feldstyn would have delayed the disturbance until a speaker from another Party was addressing the Assembly. Joseph burned to know what it was, but it was his duty to go on as if nothing were happening.

He forgot about Blaha, and he did not succeed in reviving the mood of broad humaneness which he had wanted to re-establish after the reading of the lifeless figures.

"I urge you to consider this bill with sympathy for those whom it will benefit, and to pass it so that our country may become a better one to live in."

He received some applause, not as much as he had expected, and conspicuously weak from his own section of the benches. Feldstyn was still shuttling from seat to seat, buttonholing members of the Party, instructing them. Joseph greeted him on his way back to his own seat, and hesitated in the hope that Feldstyn would talk to him. But Feldstyn seemed absorbed in his conversation with a fat deputy who came from one of the districts near Bratislava and who was famous for his cloakroom stories.

"The Chair recognizes Deputy Professor Stanek!"

With a frown, Joseph watched Stanek's short-stepped gait. The very fact that the Communists had picked a deputy from his own district to speak

on his motion could only mean that they were going to oppose it; and he couldn't see why on earth they would object to his *Lex Blaha*.

If anything, Stanek had grown more peculiar in the year and a half since the election. He had become more dilapidated, and Joseph, who made it a point to shake hands with him whenever he ran into him, was regularly appalled by the amount of dandruff on the old man's shoulders.

"I, too, knew the worker Blaha," Stanek was saying. "I knew him very well indeed, because — and this makes it so odd that he should be used by my distinguished fellow member from Rodnik in support of his motion — because Blaha was a Communist!"

The pince-nez waved in the air.

Joseph heard subdued laughter on the Left, and an embarrassed coughing in his own ranks. The heavy lids of his eyes came down. Blaha, little, meek Blaha who owed him everything, had risen from the grave to slap him in the face.

He was on his feet and, before Stanek could go on, said loudly from his seat, "I do not care to what party Blaha belonged. It seems to me Professor Stanek's remark proves that this bill transcends all party lines!"

"Order! Order!" said the Speaker.

Stanek pushed his cuffs back into his sleeves and smiled. "Be that as it may, I wish to announce that my Party and I, excepting minor technical modifications, are in favor of the bill proposed by Deputy Benda and will so vote."

He bowed toward the Speaker and the Ministerial bench and left the rostrum, pinching his pince-nez back on his thin nose.

Feldstyn raised his hand.

The Speaker said, "I have two other names on the list, Deputy Feldstyn. Do you wish to speak on the motion?"

Feldstyn, half-leaning over his desk, shoved out his Adam's apple. "Mr. Speaker, I believe a motion to table precedes further discussion?"

The Speaker's colorless voice came back, "Do you wish to so move, Deputy Feldstyn?"

"I do."

"Is the motion supported?"

The fat member from near Bratislava seconded.

Joseph was deadly white. His own Party was stabbing him in the back. After all the preparatory work he had done, after eighteen months of patient waiting for his Party's permission to present his bill, after he had corralled the necessary signatures and wangled concurrence from his Party's parliamentary club, and after even the Communists had been forced to concede — a motion to table. He reached for the carafe on his desk. He knew its design. It was made by Benda.

"All those in favor —" called the Speaker.

Feldstyn had done good work. The hands of the deputies around Joseph came up solidly. Feldstyn was looking at him. He had dark, narrow-set, piercing eyes, and there was no escape from them.

Joseph tilted the carafe and poured water into his glass.

"All those in favor —" the Speaker said again.

Feldstyn was still staring.

Slowly, slowly, Joseph's hand crept up, too.

Since none of the other parties had any reason to oppose postponement of the discussion on the bill, and since the noon recess was so close, the motion was carried.

Councilor Novak walked up the stairs of the former Nobles' Club. The Club had been converted into a series of intimate meeting rooms and a comfortable restaurant where official guests could be entertained. He favored this restaurant not for its food — food was uniformly bad wherever he went — but for these stairs, whose narrow risers made mounting them a pleasant experience. It was as if the stairs carried him up. Framed by wide marble balustrades, they had been built for portly people, not for his kind — skinny and hard-working and tough. He saw nothing, however, compelling him to shun the comforts of the fat now that the skinny were getting into power.

On the second floor, he let the attendant help him out of his overcoat. He tucked the empty left sleeve of his jacket back into his pocket. "Has anybody asked for me?"

"No, sir," said the attendant, "not yet."

Novak went into a smallish room off the foyer. He liked this room for its warm purples and grays, the old-fashioned, faded designs of its wall-paper, its heavy carpeting. It was lavishly furnished with large period chairs and graceful end-tables. Ah, how those people had lived! He always felt a bit wicked on using these facilities, and this feeling of wickedness was a little joke he enjoyed.

Sinking into a chair, he picked up a magazine. Its lead article was one of those unctuous surveys of the year now about to end. He dropped the damned thing.

It hadn't been the kind of year that lent itself to self-congratulation. He was glad that it was almost over, and he wished devoutly that the next one would be luckier. Later historians of his country, if they devoted a chapter to the year 1947, would probably call it the year of the drought, when the wheat shriveled on the fields before it could ripen, when the rivers became brooks and the brooks became nothing at all, and the cattle had to be slaughtered for lack of feed. If they were wise, the historians

would say that the drought contributed immeasurably to the sharpening of all conflicts and to the speed with which the country moved toward new decisions. They would bemoan the body blow which the scorching sun and the lack of water had delivered to the people's efforts at reconstruction; they would comment on the shrewdness with which certain forces had used the general misery to argue for a return to the good old times when the stores bulged with goods and the bread was whiter and sweeter and the corner dairies sold butter at ten crowns the pound.

But historians — that was their nature — looked at things from the outside in. He was on the inside. It was too bad, he thought, that those on the inside never had enough leisure to write history — unless they were retired, in which case they were either too old or had too big an ax to grind to do a reliable job.

He was on the inside, and he knew that, drought or no, the conflicts would have become razor sharp and the speed of development breathtaking, because economics have their own laws and compromises can perhaps retard, but never stop, the inevitable course of motion.

The die, he told himself, was really cast when the Marshall Plan was refused despite the country's bitter needs. Even if one chose to believe in the improbable supposition that the Americans were the kind of angels who tied no strings to their offers, acceptance would have meant subordination to a capitalist economy and ultimate abandonment of the socialist sector of one's own. Dolezhal had fought like a tigress defending her pups; he had spoken glowingly of the turbines, the generators, the mining machinery, the freezing plants, the tractors and trucks and road-building equipment which would come from across the sea; he had painted mouth-watering pictures of bacon and canned beef and sugar and flour and butter and powdered milk; and his Party's newspapers had risen to the occasion.

It had almost worked. Without bitterness, but rather with wry humor, Novak remembered how close he had come to being eased out of his job, because, from his official files, he had supplied the data which proved that the country was able to pull itself up by its own bootstraps.

After it was over, after a rationing system had been worked out which Dolezhal had to defend in public — and it couldn't have been pleasant for him — a state of armed truce had come into being between Minister and Councilor. But the point was that, except for the title, Dolezhal and himself now were operating on the same level of power.

It couldn't last, Novak knew. With the next crisis, with the next slight push at the balance, the fight would be renewed and one of them would be finished.

He leaned back, relaxed. He still could be objective about his chief. Dolezhal was an able citizen, and Novak wished he had him on his side.

It wasn't a matter of personalities, anyhow; if it were, he would resign today. The truth was that in this situation, the clash had to express itself in and through personalities, and there was no office, no institution, no enterprise any place in the country where men could escape from the part that history had assigned them.

The attendant came in and announced, "Your guest, Mr. Novak!" and directly behind him Novak saw Kravat.

Kravat had acquired clothes that fit him and was no longer discommoded by the knot of his necktie; yet, he remained the man who could not be identified with the dark, striped business suit he wore. His head and his hands belonged to denim, and the attendant, who was conscious of these things, regretted the comedown of the former Nobles' Club.

Novak led Kravat into the restaurant, to a small table near the window which he had reserved. The tablecloth was of fine linen, but patched, and the silverware, neatly laid out, came from various sets. With a bow, the waiter placed menus in front of them and stood in readiness with his little note pad.

Novak looked doubtfully at Kravat and said, "We'll have trouble feeding you right, Franta."

"It's this damned rationing!" confirmed Kravat. "You know, I've started to raise rabbits, back home, and on Sundays I go out and forage for leaves and stuff to fatten them up. Now they've got baby rabbits, second litter already, and where am I going to get wire netting to build new cages?"

"You bring us what you think best," said Novak, handing the menus back to the waiter. And returning to Kravat, "Tell me more about the rabbits. Do you use any particular strain? Have you made any observations on which strains propagate fastest, grow biggest, give the most and best-tasting meat? All this is important. We can't afford to overlook anything that helps us to keep people's bellies filled."

The waiter brought two plates of anemic soup in which a few noodles led a lonely existence.

"If we could give out breeding stock of rabbits to unions and organizations, to schools and large families . . ." Novak said speculatively. "How long till an animal is full-grown? Eh, Franta? How much meat does it give? I kind of like *Hasenpfeffer*, and there must be dozens of other ways to cook it. And the furs!"

"I wouldn't know," said Kravat, fishing for the noodles. "I haven't had the heart to kill any. They're so nice to hold in your hands. . . ."

"You should get married," Novak said, disgusted, "or buy a canary for your affections."

For a while, they ate in silence. When the soup dishes had been replaced

by the meat course—the meat the size and almost the taste of a ritual wafer—Novak spoke up again.

“What’s new, aside from rabbits?”

Kravat hesitated. “I need your advice.”

Novak used his one hand deftly to cut his meat and his dumpling; he put down his knife and picked up his fork. “About Joseph Benda?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Frankly, Franta, I guessed you would come with that a lot sooner.”

With a slice of bread, Kravat mopped up the sauce until his plate was sparkingly clean. “It took me a long while to get on to him. He works hard and he has his fingers in everything, despite the time he has to spend in the Assembly in Prague. He plans production down to its last detail, and he’s a first-rate organizer. He knows glass better than anyone I’ve ever met, and by God, he even got me to believe that he was honest.”

“He isn’t?”

The wrinkles on Kravat’s horsy face grew longer and deeper. There was no one word to delineate exactly what Joseph Benda’s methods amounted to.

“Oh yes, he’s honest,” Kravat said heavily. “He knows he’s got to be, with everybody watching him and with Government accountants coming around every few months to check on his books. Of course, in glass, where you deal with thousands of different small items, he could do things outside the books — ”

“As what?”

“Chisel on the rejects. Say there’s an order for one thousand vases. Say the average rate of defectiveness is 10 per cent. That means we have to blow eleven hundred pieces to be sure of making a full delivery. But suppose that instead of the anticipated rate only fifty pieces turn out bad — what happens to the other fifty that are over?”

“He sells them black?”

Kravat laughed sourly. “Anyone else in his situation probably would. That’s what had me fooled. No, he doesn’t. Every piece of glass that ever was blown at Benda or at Hammer is accounted for!”

The dessert was a finger’s width of a layer cake made of dark, dusty-tasting flour and cheap marmalade, topped by an ersatz cream smelling faintly of shaving soap, although shaving soap was short, too. Kravat ate it with relish and talked between bites. “Joseph Benda controls the two big furnaces in the Rodnik district, with about two dozen refineries dependent on them. The furnaces are nationalized, the refineries are in private hands.”

“Ah!” said Novak. “Nothing petty about him!”

"Nothing petty," confirmed Kravat, picking up the last crumbs of the cake, "and nothing outside the law. His job is to see that what the furnaces produce is sold. Except for Government purchases, there are no rules about where he sells it, and as long as the refineries can use more unfinished glass than we can turn out, he has the whip hand over them."

"In other words, he's gone into the refinery business?"

"He always was in it," said Kravat, folding his napkin. "His wife owns Vesely's."

Novak scratched his scalp through the hair that grew thick and black at his temples. "That eminently energetic wife of his," he said, "I always expected great things of her."

"She's grown," confirmed Kravat. "She's grown nicely."

"So he gives preference to her," said Novak with a frown that made him look like a satyr disturbed in his afternoon's nap. "It's not quite fair to the other refiners, but after all, as long as there is private competition . . . And I haven't heard of any squawks coming from them."

"He's a deputy in the second-biggest political Party. They'd better not squawk."

Novak nodded, half-amused. "But Joseph Benda should know that he cannot afford to let his wife's outfit grow out of proportion. Because if it becomes too big, it will be nationalized under the law."

"He knows that. He was burned once, don't forget. He feels about Vesely's the way the poor man in the Bible felt about his one little ewe lamb; he's not going to let it grow enough for the Government to covet! No — Lida, in turn, farms out the work. She's got a whole string of small fellows with three or four grinding wheels that they operate in their homes, cheap, and the difference goes to Vesely's, meaning to Joseph and Lida Benda."

Novak's hand reached for the saccharine the waiter provided in place of sugar for the ersatz coffee. "There is no law by which we can stop it. As long as we have a private sector of economy, we must expect that little monopolies will try to crop up."

"Little monopolies! . . . You have no idea how this thing has snowballed! When the wholesalers found out that Vesely's was practically the only refinery able to fill any order, and to fill it on time, they naturally threw their business to Lida. And if the other refiners wanted to continue operating, they had to be like the home workers and become sub-contractors of Vesely's and kick over a good share of their profits to Lida Benda and the Deputy."

"What a racket!" said Novak admiringly. "You've got to give credit to this system of free enterprise. It'll take the freedom away from everybody else. . . . Let's get up, shall we?"

They walked back to the sitting room. On the way, Novak greeted a number of people at other tables. "Half the Government eats here," he explained.

Kravat was awed by the prominence of the other diners.

"Half the Government," Novak repeated—"the half that can't afford the black market prices."

They sat down on the historic chairs. Novak offered Kravat a cigarette, stuck one between his own lips, and warded off the offer of a light. Holding a matchbox between ring finger and little finger of his hand, he used thumb and index finger to strike the match against it. Then his eyes lit up with satisfaction. "Took me three months to learn the trick! In another fifty years, I'll be as good as a two-armed man!"

Kravat never before had heard him mention his missing limb, and he felt the reticence toward discussing it which any whole man of sensitivity would feel in the presence of a cripple.

"If it's a racket," he said abruptly, "why don't you stop it?"

"How?" asked Novak. "I'm open to suggestions."

"Your Ministry made Joseph Benda National Administrator in Rodnik and in Martinice — now unmake him!"

"And precipitate a political crisis? You can't fire a man of Joseph Benda's national importance from his civilian job unless you can prove that he's a crook. And you can't prove it."

He let that sink in. He could sense what was going through the mind of Kravat, who had been pushed into a key position and into the midst of an intrigue. The man was trying to puzzle out the fine distinction between legitimate business practices and highway robbery.

"I can see how he does it at Benda," Novak went on. "But at Hammer in Martinice *you* are the manager!"

"That's true," agreed Kravat, with an awkward smile. "When I took over, there was nothing. Now our plan, taking into account that we have two furnaces at Hammer, foresees over twice the production of Benda, and we're fulfilling the plan — despite 85 per cent Sudeten-German workers! I'm a production man, production was our target; so I was happy when Joseph Benda reserved the business end for himself. He kept the old bookkeepers — Germans. He kept the old shipping department — Germans. And they keep their mouths shut and follow orders, because they are Germans and because they're shivering with fear of being transferred across the border."

"He's still got all those Germans in there?"

"They're difficult to replace, he claims."

"Two and a half years after the war?"

"Two and a half years after the Revolution," echoed Kravat. "The

Germans he can hold in the palm of his hand. With Czechs he might have trouble. It's not even funny."

For a minute, the Councilor sat studying his empty left sleeve.

"If every man in the country" — he said finally — "if every man in the world carried on his body a scar to remind him every waking moment of what that war meant, we'd have an easier time of it."

He rose.

"Go back to your furnaces, Kravat, and attend to your production."

The strain was beginning to tell on Dolezhal. He held on to an even temper while he was in his office in the Ministry, or in the lobbies and on the Cabinet bench in Parliament, at conferences, sessions, and functions of state. But at home, with his narrow-shouldered, thin-breasted wife — whose sweet face, over the years, had frozen into frightened servility — he let himself go. The acidity of his wit, untempered by political considerations, was merciless. He compensated for the defeats, which he had to accept, by maintaining a terroristic dictatorship over the one citizen who was his subject without question: his wife.

Joseph was unable to guess at all the causes of this behavior, since he still believed in the unshaken political mastery of the Minister; but he saw the effects, and sympathized with Mrs. Dolezhal. On the evenings which he and Petra spent at Dolezhal's home, he tried to soften the blows whenever he could. This was not easy. He had to be most diplomatic, because he was firmly convinced that these evenings were indispensable to his career. At the same time, he resented being pulled in as a witness to the Minister's browbeating, although he was aware of Dolezhal's need for relief from the daily pressures.

The childless man had taken a fancy to Petra. Petra had come to acquire a distinct loveliness, a combination of the doelike qualities of her grandmother Anna and the ruggedness and sensitivity of the Bendas. Gone were the protruding hipbones and knees, the unwieldy gawkiness of the adolescent. "Look at her!" the Minister was fond of saying. "Look at her, Margot dear. Wouldn't it be wonderful if you had borne me a child like that!"

Margot dear, after such requests, would show tears in her pale tortured eyes, and say, "Yes, it would. But God, in His infinite wisdom, did not bless us."

"Don't cry!" the Minister would then reply. "Tears over things that cannot be remedied indicate a lack of dignity. Come here, Petra. What would you like? I've seen a charming little garnet necklace in a store, an antique, but of very simple design, and just the thing for that graceful neck. You don't mind, Joseph, if I spoil the child? I've none of my own. . . ."

Petra soaked up the Minister's compliments. These evenings were an exciting break in the disciplined routine at the boarding school of Mademoiselle Declerques, where her father had placed her. Mademoiselle Declerques personally supervised every detail of her dress and coiffure before permitting her to leave for the command performances. Mademoiselle made no bones about the advertising value of her star boarder's correct carriage and manners.

Petra had enough intuition to suspect that she was part of a game in which everybody gained but poor Mrs. Dolezhal. Her father needed the Minister, and the Minister needed her; and although she felt a kind of revulsion at the occasional pat of the Minister's small white hand, she tolerated it because being admired was such a new experience, and because she liked gifts and colors and richness and change.

She looked at Mrs. Dolezhal and wondered what the pathetic woman had been like twenty or thirty years ago to have captured a man like the Minister. Despite his great age — for Petra, old age started at forty so that Karel was still safely ensconced within the limits of possibility — Dolezhal was a handsome man with his large, classic features, his healthy coloring, and his bushy, impressive mustache. Perhaps he had married Mrs. Dolezhal for her money — but that was improbable; wives with a fortune, as her own mother could prove, usually were well able to keep their husbands under their thumb. No, Mrs. Dolezhal once upon a time must have been quite pretty, and Petra shuddered when she thought of what could become of a woman unloved.

Her father was talking to the Minister about business, some law or something that apparently had failed of passage. "You're right," Dolezhal was saying in a tone almost like the one he used for Mrs. Dolezhal, "I owe you an explanation on Feldstyn's motion. . . ."

Petra was filled with sadness for Mrs. Dolezhal; she went over to the sofa in whose corner the little woman sat, pulling at a much-creased embroidered handkerchief. The light, diffused by the crystals of the chandelier her father had presented to the Minister, was casting tiny, ever-changing speckles over Mrs. Dolezhal's gray face and dress. Petra sat down next to her and said, "You know, I really don't like garnets at all."

"Margot dear!" Dolezhal called over, "I want you to take good care of our young friend. Please, do make an effort at entertaining her!"

Since he immediately turned back to Joseph, Mrs. Dolezhal did not think she should answer him. Instead, in a low voice, she said to Petra, "I guess I am not very entertaining."

"But you are!" exclaimed Petra. "You are! What shall we talk about? I can tell you of the girls at Mademoiselle Declerques's, or about Mademoiselle herself — she is very funny. We call her the Crow because she

never wears anything but black and sticks her head into everything. . . .”

The Dolezhals’ salon was a large, heavily curtained affair designed to hold sixty or seventy people comfortably. It gave guests a chance to move around and talk sociably, or to break up into small groups and have confidential political chats. Joseph and the Minister, who had settled at the other end of the room, could hear no more than a mumbling of Petra’s intentionally gay report of life at Mademoiselle Declerques’s.

“It was I who sent Feldstyn into the Chamber!” Dolezhal’s hand stabbed toward his own chest. “Sometimes it is necessary to act quickly, even at the risk of leaving one of our own people out on a limb. Sorry it had to be you.”

“I want to know why!” Joseph protested. He turned around to make sure that Petra was absorbed in conversation. “You’ve made me ridiculous in front of the whole House. You’ve given Feldstyn, who dislikes me anyhow, the chance he was waiting for. And you’ve defeated a bill that would have been a perfect talking point in the next elections!”

The Minister answered obliquely. “This Blaha you mentioned in your speech — was he a friend of yours?”

Joseph looked at his hands. Of course, the first thing Feldstyn had done was to report Stanek’s quip to Dolezhal.

“If you want to know,” he said with a sudden brutality that impressed Dolezhal, “I helped kill the man.”

There was a pause.

“Margot dear!” said the Minister loudly, “why don’t you offer Petra some chocolates?”

I wish he would stop calling her “dear,” thought Joseph. He heard Mrs. Dolezhal go for the sweets, he heard the crackling of the paper in which the candy was wrapped. Then Petra’s muted chatter began again.

“I presumed there was some personal issue to your bill.” Dolezhal took up the matter. “But there’s a fight on, as you very well know!” His voice, free from the restraints of office, became sharp. “A fight over life and death!”

Mrs. Dolezhal and Petra at once grew still. The Minister controlled his voice again, but his hands hacked the air. “Life and death, I say! And I can’t have your God-damned conscience come between my moves. I’m going to use your bill as a trade-in.”

Joseph had participated in too many political horsedeals to have any basis for objection. Yet now that his own brain child was to be bartered, it hurt.

Dolezhal’s face was kindly. “Perhaps if I tell you what is afoot, you’ll feel better. Perhaps you’ll even thank Feldstyn and me for what we did. They’ve finally come out with it, in a top-level conference over that sec-

tion of the new Constitution. They're pushing for nationalization of all enterprises down to fifty workers."

There was no need to explain who *they* were. *They* were all that Joseph had hated since — ages ago, it seemed — the one-armed Mephisto in Dolezhal's office had for the first time uttered the threat against his life's work and meaning.

"Do I have to tell you what it means?" Dolezhal's mustache seemed to cave in over his bitter mouth. "It means that they want to take away the economic foundation for our political existence. It means the destruction of our Party. It means ultimate and final defeat."

Joseph rubbed his sweated hands. It meant all that, and it meant much more. It meant Vesely's, the last remnant of his family's holdings, the last line of retreat beyond which there was only abysmal poverty. It meant the mowing down of the sapling so carefully and skillfully nurtured and nursed, and which had responded so well.

"I must build a front," said Dolezhal, "a front that will hold. a front of everybody who's not a Communist. And I must use that bill of yours for cement. If we had passed it the other day, and we could have passed it in five minutes, I'd now have one less item to bargain with, one less concession to make to the other parties. I'm going to throw in a whole social program with plenty of bones for everybody to nibble on, so as to keep the essentials we must keep if we want to live. And it's going to cost us dearly because, God damn it, the rabble here has got into the habit of wanting to control things, and the rabble is what sends politicians into power."

With a last stab of his hand, Dolezhal had concluded. He looked spent, as if the mere outlining of his tremendous task was a drain. He got up heavily and trudged over to his wife and to the child he would have liked to have.

To Joseph, who had followed him, he said, "You know what we're fighting for — this child here. I want her to have all the good things in life. . . . Wouldn't you like to spend a winter on the Riviera, Petra? And the summer at Pupp in Karlsbad? Wouldn't you like to dance with good-looking, well-educated, and well-behaved young men, and sit in the loge at the opera? . . . Margot dear, have a bottle of champagne brought in."

He glanced after his wife, who obediently was hurrying to the door to pull at the bell cord, and shook his head and muttered something to himself. Then, abruptly, to Joseph, "There's another little concession we'll have to make. Get rid of those Germans at the Hammer Works, throw out as many as you possibly can, even if it cuts production. Do some house cleaning, and do it fast!"

Joseph, his large feet spread, stood absolutely quiet. At this moment, his feet, his body, himself, were the only reality. Everything else — the room,

the rug, the drapes, the heavy furniture, the Minister, his stunted wife, even Petra sitting there — was lost in the sudden recognition that from somewhere a new threat was being set up against him.

And he would have to drink champagne when what he needed was a man-sized, stiff whisky.

CHAPTER TWO

THERE was something odd, something almost unprofessional in Karel's reaction to the patient. He tried to figure it out as he watched the man slip on his gray woolen shirt and knitted vest. They were the ordinary man's pieces of clothing, yet to Karel they spelled out *Wehrmacht* supplies. With sharp suddenness, he recognized his feeling: for so many years he had been in the power of men like the Sudeten-German silently busy with his buttons, that the reversal still seemed improbable and daring.

Karel observed the give of the vest over the paunchy stomach. "You're the last patient today, Ebbing?" he asked.

The man held rigidly to his half-military, half-servile stance. "The last one, yes, sir." His eyes slid toward the form Karel was filling out. "I beg pardon," he went on, "but I couldn't help it if I was late. Mr. Joseph Benda gave orders that this shipment had to go out, and I must check it, every single crate. If I've held up the doctor — I mean, it wasn't my fault — and I hope it won't make any difference in — " He looked at the form sheet again, squinting with the effort to read Karel's notations.

"You may go, Ebbing," said Karel.

The man's eyes jumped away from the sheet. "Then, with your kind permission," he said hastily, "I wish you a Merry Christmas, Dr. Benda."

"Thank you."

Karel stared at the back of Ebbing's neck as the man made for the door. It was a red, sturdy neck, bullish and straight, and it bulged a little over the tight collar. At the door, knob in hand, Ebbing turned. His light-blue pupils trembled in his pink-veined eyes as he said, "If you send me away, Dr. Benda, I'm going to die — " his excitement gave his Czech a German inflection — "die in the gutter somewhere like a mangy dog. And I have family. I've lived here in Martinice all my life. . . ."

"With the exception of the time you served in the German Army."

"Yes, sir," said Ebbing. "But they discharged me and let me go home, with my ulcers and my bad heart."

"You gave me your medical history. I've examined you."

"What are you going to report, Dr. Benda?"

"You will be notified."

The blue eyes hardened in a quick gleam of hate. Then the man was gone. Merry Christmas, indeed. Karel wrote at the bottom of the sheet: *O.K. for transfer*. He screwed on the top of his fountain pen, clipped it into the breast pocket of his jacket, and began to pack up his instruments.

He disliked his semiweekly visits to the Hammer Works, and he had come to dislike the last few especially. The SS medics in Buchenwald had restricted themselves to a glance at their victims and a flick of the thumb; he gave a thorough examination to each man on the deportation list, and to every member of the prospective deportee's family. The SS medics had weeded out the weak and helpless and sent them to their deaths; he made sure that the Germans picked to be shipped to Germany were strong and healthy. And yet, a selection was a selection. He thought of Thomas's protests of two years ago -- if they had been heeded, if Martinice had been cleared of Germans then, the heat engendered by war and occupation would still have been strong enough to temper the cool deliberateness which now lent the procedure an outward similarity to the Nazi original. Well, the thing had to be done, better late than never. He rolled up the rubber tubes of his stethoscope, threw it into his bag, and pressed down the clasp.

He heard the door move in its hinges. "Ebbing?" he asked without looking up, "what is it this time?"

"I didn't know you were still in here," said Joseph. "I'm sorry."

Karel spun around, his face flushing. Broad and not at all apologetic, Joseph leaned in the doorway.

"I was just leaving your office, Joseph. I'm finished for the day. I wish Kravat would put some kind of stove in that examination room he gave me. I can't ask a man to undress in an ice cellar."

"I know." Joseph laughed. "Kravat probably assumes I don't come to Martinice often enough to deserve privacy. Who am I? Only the National Administrator." He dumped his fur-lined coat over a chair. "Don't run, Karel, just because I have to stick my head into my work for a moment. I must use the Christmas recess of the Assembly to catch up on details." He went to the desk Karel had vacated, pulled open a drawer, and then noticed Karel's report sheets lying on top. "May I have a look?"

"Sure!"

Joseph flipped through the pages, paused at a few names, read Karel's concluding remarks on each paper. He was as casual about it as about finding his brother using his office; it was the same friendly indifference he displayed whenever they happened to run into one another. It put

Karel at a disadvantage. Karel would have much preferred the complete, hostile silence of boycott, or a frank discussion of the clash that had followed Blaha's death. Some mutual attitude would have been the upshot of such an exchange; but Joseph's neutrality left everything unsettled.

Joseph handed the papers to Karel. "Petra is home for her vacation," he said.

"How's she doing?"

"Fine. Fine, and getting pretty. She's quite adjusted to Prague and to her boarding school. She's been pestering me about you —"

"She has?"

"She wants me to invite you for Christmas Eve dinner. . . . Would you come?"

It was a dry question — a polite request for information.

"Thomas and Kitty are coming," Joseph added.

Karel shoved the papers into a large envelope and rolled it into his coat pocket. He had hoped that Kitty would ask him to spend Christmas Eve on St. Nepomuk. But it had been a faint hope only. He had kept away from her and Thomas more often than not, over the year; there was no reason to expect the invitation.

"I'm afraid, Joseph, it might be a very uncomfortable evening, all around."

"It might be, at that." Joseph nodded amicably. "It's really a shame. On Christmas Eve."

No sentimental appeal to family feeling, just a factual statement of objective regret. Karel felt it keenly.

Joseph didn't pursue the subject. He pointed at the envelope sticking out of Karel's pocket, "By the way — are you sure about Ebbing? The man is ill; all you have to do is look at that puffy face. He told me that even the *Wehrmacht* doctor decided he was unfit for service — and the German Army wasn't so choosy about what cripples wore its glorious uniform."

Karel, smiling briefly at the crack, stated: "The man's heart is as good as yours, probably, and certainly better than mine. His blood pressure is too high — but that's because he's too fat. I don't know how he manages to stuff himself. . . ."

Joseph was vaguely disturbed. If ever I should get really sick, he thought, God grant that I'm in Prague where I can find a doctor who doesn't go in for snap diagnoses.

"As for his ulcers," Karel continued, "I went so far as to feed him barium and have him come to Rodnik for an X-ray of his stomach. Negative. There was some blood in his stool. So I didn't look at his face, as you suggested; I examined the other end. His hemorrhoids may be a little painful on the ride to Germany — but that's all."

Joseph guffawed. "I'll admit he's as obnoxious as they come."

"Are you interested in keeping the fellow?"

Joseph raised his heavy lids. His mind had been occupied with Lida, and with the trouble that was bound to develop in the raw glass shipments to her subcontractors if Ebbing was deported. "What were you saying, Karel?"

"I asked you if you needed the man particularly."

Karel's pleasantly impersonal tone sounded too reasonable to be true.

"Well, Doctor, it's like this," Joseph bantered carefully. "I've agreed to get rid of most of the Germans at Hammer because I don't want difficulties with your friends. They feel they can replace the Germans with Czechs; well, it's about time, and I'm very happy about it. I don't care who blows my glass. But another Ebbing is very hard to find — he heads the shipping department here, he knows all the routes, all the regulations, all the customers and how they want their stuff shipped and packed; without him, there will be six months of mess which it'll take six more months to clear up."

Maybe not twice six months, thought Karel. Maybe a month or two. It was too much to do about a paunchy German shipping clerk with a red neck. He was disagreeably aware of Joseph's searching glance. Ill-humoredly he said, "You might bring up your point when it comes to the signing of the transfer orders. Whichever authorities do the deciding will listen to you."

"But you could save me the run-around. I may be back in Prague by then, and —"

Karel frowned. "I hear he was a Nazi, too."

"Of course he was! They all were."

"No, they weren't, quite. I know from Kravat that all Hammer employees were screened and that we're keeping the few decent ones. Let's call him in; let's ask him about Ebbing! If the man is that indispensable, Kravat should be just as much in favor of holding him as you are."

"Oh, don't bother. . . ." Joseph waved him off tiredly. "I'll settle it some way."

"Anything else?"

"No —" Joseph hesitated. "Well, yes. . . . Think about that Christmas Eve business, Karel. Because of Petra." It was a feeble effort, and Karel could guess that his brother made it only because dropping the matter completely would have looked awkward.

A large Christmas tree was set up in the yard of the Benda Works, with blue and yellow and red electric bulbs and silver tinsel and glass balls and bells of garish hue and with a golden-winged angel swaying at the very top. It was Joseph's project, and he had paid for it out of his own pocket.

The Works Council had dipped into its special fund to buy small presents and candies for the children of the workers.

In the afternoon it had snowed, and some of the snow clung to the tree. After dark, when its lights were turned on and when the harsh outlines of the buildings receded into soft shadows, the tree's splendor transformed the drab yard into a festive square. It highlighted the faces of the children ringing it, their shining eyes, their scrubbed cheeks, and their open lips from which the breath rose in short, thin clouds. It cast occasional flecks of color on the darker frame of grownups beyond. It shed a mild gleam over the mellow face of the Reverend Trnka as he raised his hands to conduct the chorus:

Born this day is Christ our Lord!

The melody, the children's voices, went to Karel's heart. It was like listening to the far-off sounds of his own childhood. He felt a twinge of loneliness. Standing here among these men for whom he worked and with whom he shared the Christmas tree and the children's faith, he felt lonely. Oh, there had been a good number of them who had asked him to spend this evening at their homes; they were thoughtful and kind, and there was no real need for him to suffer from lack of company if he wanted it.

Let us then be joyful . . .

But he was no integral part of anything, not of his family, nor of the people whose soft humming hovered below the children's sopranos and enveloped him. Except for what there was of his medical knowledge and skill, he might be dead, and no one would be the poorer. At any other time, he could have shrugged off this sense of aloneness; the year had been full, his days so crowded with work, his nights so dead with fatigue, that there had been hardly an opportunity for private emotions; but at this hour it hit him.

From the rose a rosebud grew . . .

On the opposite side of the tree stood Joseph, his arm around Petra. Lida, hugging the collar of her fur coat to her neck, was moving her lips in the words of the carol. Thomas, bareheaded, was holding Kitty's hand. Karel smiled. Was it the mood of this night, or the light brushing over Thomas's features? Karel found him incredibly young and at peace. Their eyes met. Thomas said a few words to Kitty, and both of them looked up. Karel saw their hands rise in a silent Christmas greeting to him.

Let our hearts rejoicel

The carol was over. Several men from the Works Council, their arms bulging with packages, moved into place in front of the tree. The children, one by one, stepped up to receive their gifts and to say thank you. They were quiet and shy; the spell of the tree and the music was not yet broken. Joseph was gone from Lida's side, had disappeared between the people or in the sections of the yard not reached by the lights of the tree. Karel readied himself for a sonorous "Merry Christmas!" from his brother, and for his own reply which would contain an equal dose of cheer. But when he discovered Joseph again, the deputy was walking along the queue of children, tapping some on the cheeks, asking others what they wished from the Christ Child. Karel turned away from the tree and the handing out of the gifts and Joseph's good-will tour.

This was his chance to go over to Kitty and Thomas. But he didn't. Instead, he went to the deserted space before the large table holding a miniature Nativity which had been built by some of the Benda workers. He tried to concentrate on the display. It was naïve and heart-warming. A flatly painted oriental town formed the backdrop, with cut-out minarets and cupolas and stone huts on vineyard-covered hills. A star with an orange tail pointing at the stable in the foreground hung suspended from a wire. The Holy Three Kings rode in from the left on stiff-legged camels; the Moor bringing up the rear wore a green turban of real silk. The shepherds knelt next to the oxen and the ass; the Biblical Joseph, frowning over the excitement, or the question of doubtful paternity, stroked his white beard, and his head was cocked toward the manger. Mary, the young Mother, was raising her hands as if in amazement over the Miracle Child — who, quite a little giant, filled the manger and stretched His fat arms toward the audience and took the heavy gold of His halo very much in His stride.

Karel felt a hand nestle itself into the crook of his elbow.

"Uncle Karel . . ." It was a small voice. "I love you still."

The quietly burning candles cast their rays from the hills of Bethlehem over Petra's soft hair and left tiny specks of reflection in her eyes.

"Bless you," he said, "and a Merry Christmas."

"I saw you all alone — " she began again.

"Thank you for coming." He glanced at her serious, avid little face, so full of concern, not quite mature, and yet no longer a child's. Then he shook off his mood. "Alone? — I couldn't get to see the Nativity before — too much of a crowd here. . . . I have a present for you. I want to bring it around to you one of these days."

"Why not tonight?" she smiled.

"Did your father send you, Petra?"

"Oh, no!" If she was hurt, she forgot it immediately. "What are you going to give me?"

"It's supposed to be a surprise!"

"I've got something for you, too, but I won't tell you what it is if you don't tell me. . . ." She was tugging at him. "You've seen enough of this, come on! We're driving home right after the last carol, my father said, and there'll be a cake with real whipped cream!"

Her eagerness was infectious. My God, he thought, if all men tried to escape tensions by shutting themselves off in their caves, we'd still be in the Stone Age. He allowed himself to be dragged along to Kitty and Thomas and Lida, and to Joseph who had joined them again. He managed to make his approach appear random, saying to Petra, "Remember how much you wanted to grow up? You see, it happened by itself. . . ." and timing the remark so that it came within earshot of Lida and could be concluded with, "You can be very proud of your daughter."

"You think so?" Lida answered promptly. "I hope what you say of her has more basis in fact than what you've said about other people."

"Oh, well — " Karel laughed. "Merry Christmas, Lida!" and turning to Kitty and his brothers, "And to all of you!"

"And to you, Karel!" said Kitty.

He looked down. He didn't want her to see the hunger in his eyes. She was reaching up and kissing him on both cheeks. "How cold your face is!"

"It's a cold night!" he apologized, embarrassed. How warm her lips were! How well she had succeeded in anesthetizing what had been between them, if she was able to kiss him like that, familiarly and yet impersonally, in front of all of Rodnik!

"Uncle Karel is coming with us!" announced Petra. "I persuaded him!"

Before Joseph or Lida could say anything, the Reverend Trnka's tiny whistle was sounding the A; he had regrouped his chorus, and was singing a scaled *La — la — la — la* to his sections.

The children's voices rose:

Gloria in excelsis Deo . . .

And then there was a strange sound from far away, dying off, starting up again, approaching, diminishing once more in the distance — a wheezing, four-toned siren. The children's chorus faltered but kept on under the Reverend Trnka's urging arms.

Et in terra pax!

Joseph's mousy secretary came running from the office.

"Telephone — Mr. Benda — "

"I'll be right back," he said to the family.

Hominibus boni voluntatis. . . .

The stir and commotion grew among the men and swallowed the thin voices. A kind of premonition seized Karel. Beyond the tree, he saw hurrying shapes; some of the men were rushing out of the yard, calling to each other.

Suddenly Joseph was back. His hair was disheveled, his forehead spotted with red, and his jaw muscles worked heavily. His tongue did not seem to obey him fully.

"The Hammer Works — a fire — a big fire —"

Lida's fur coat dropped open; her hand went to her throat.

"Burning down —" he stammered, "I must be going. . . ."

They all went.

Joseph sat gripping the wheel, his powerful body hunched forward, his face haggard in the dim light of the dashboard. The car's headlights cut the night into foggy strips through which the white of the trees and the black of the rock flew like ghosts. The clouds had come low. Where the sky broke through the heavy crowns of the trees, the stars were no more than faint dots in the haze.

The muddy, partially snow-covered road was cut up by the big wheels of the Rodnik fire trucks. Joseph tried to keep away from the tracks, but the car slid into them over and again.

No one said much.

Thomas saw the hand of fate clamping down on Joseph and the family. Nations had been wiped out by history, cities had been destroyed by wars or earthquakes — so why not such infinitesimal cells as families? Of course you fought against it, you did this and that, but it was like the wiggling of a worm caught under the peasant's foot. You got yourself elected, or you wrote deep essays; but once you were on the downgrade, you went on sliding.

Kitty was ill with pity for Joseph. Her face was pale and she kept her eyes closed; she did not want to have to see him, or anyone. A big fire, on Christmas Eve when everything was shut down and nobody ever was at the furnace! Someone had laid the fire. Someone had picked this night, of all nights — the night of love, when the Christ Child had come into the world to bring peace, when families assembled and brothers remembered that they were brothers.

"By now they ought to have it under control," Lida was saying with a show of courage. "They've got fire-fighting equipment in Martinice, and our trucks from Rodnik must have arrived, and I suppose they'll be sending aid from Limberk."

"I suppose so," said Joseph. He easily guessed what she was thinking. The books of Vesely's were crammed with orders from all over the world,

and where was she going to get the raw glass to cut, if Hammer fell out? So she was keeping up her hopes, refusing to believe in catastrophe until she had seen and estimated its full extent herself. And probably she was already casting about for substitute measures.

There must be people like that, he thought glumly, and perhaps it is good that they exist and that I am married to one. They keep you going and sit on your neck and whip you on. But, oh Jesus, how I wish they'd shut up and leave you alone at a time like this!

The light of a passing car swished through his. He caught a glimpse of Karel's face in the rear-view mirror, and in this one moment read all there was on it. Karel knew what was on his mind, had been on his mind ever since the *Gloria* had been jarred by the siren. Karel was a Benda and knew the quirks of the Benda brain; Karel had lived through Blaha's death with him and had tried to pin that on him. Joseph gripped the wheel tighter. There was a curse on him since Blaha's death, or maybe from before it, a curse that went back to the years when he had bent under his father's iron will and stopped doing what he had wanted to do.

The halfway mark, the glistening rock of black-blue slate, hove into sight and in the glare of the headlights showed its gashes. With snow in its crevices, it looked this night more than ever like an immense piece of cut crystal, placed haphazardly on the mountain's back as a symbol to the people who lived and suffered here.

But beyond the rock, the sky had changed. A still, rosy light, dyeing the billowing fringes of the clouds pink, deepened to a bloody red toward the valley of Martinice.

Joseph took the hairpin curve without slackening his speed. The rear wheels of the car slid and screeched, a shower of mud drummed against the windows; then the road downward spread out and the car jumped forward into the valley.

The people of Martinice crowded the streets that led to the Works. Joseph, pressing his thumb on the Klaxon's button, made them tumble aside. He could see flames now, shooting into the sky, and garbs of sparks where the miserably weak streams from the firemen's hoses hit the skeletons of the gables. A police cordon had been thrown around the Works, but he and his car were recognized and allowed to pass. He drove into the yard, brought the car to a halt behind one of the pumping engines from Limberk, and climbed out.

The men in the yard, most of them wearing black leather helmets with a cockscomb attachment of metal that shone silver or gold in the reflections of the flames, were far too busy to care about him. A police officer in an olive drab overcoat with red shoulder straps strolled over and saluted.

"Quite a fire, Mr. Benda!" he said as if that were something to his credit.

"I can see that!"

The heat from the crackling flames combined with the hot rush of Joseph's anxiety. The police officer helped him out of his coat and carried it for him.

"Arson!" he said. "Tonight! There's nothing that's holy to them!"

"Arson . . ." Joseph repeated wearily.

"German bastards! Should have kicked them out of the country long ago. They'd kill us if they could!"

Joseph said nothing. They should have been kicked out long ago — or not at all. It was these half-measures of expediency, these pressures and counterpressures, this playing politics with production, one day hop and the next day skip, Kravat and Karel and Dolezhal and all of them — and here he was, staring at the flames.

"It started in the generator," the police officer said, pointing at the tumbled-down shed which still belched heavy, stinking clouds. "But a minute later there were flames in both furnace halls, and we've found empty gasoline cans, from the Works garage."

"The watchman?"

The officer shrugged. "Christmas Eve!"

"Anyone caught?"

Another shrug. "We've arrested about a dozen of them. We know pretty much who's who. The commissioner from Limberk is at the station-house now, asking questions."

The officer's answers hardly penetrated to Joseph's mind. It was a side issue anyhow, even if the police got hold of the unspeakable vermin that had set the plant afire. Thank God that tomorrow was a full holiday — but the day after . . . ! He could see the headlines. The photographers from Limberk were there, among the firemen. One perched on top of the cab of a fire truck, his camera raised, his flash bulb popping. And the editorials! *Responsibility for Sabotage!* And a few lines below: *We cannot afford to tread easy on this subject.* They never could, particularly not with a Benda to be blamed, a Benda who was a deputy. *We must expose mercilessly . . .* They were great at that exposing business, it didn't cost them a penny and it was worth millions to them. Maybe after this, Feldstyn would come to him with a letter all typed out, ready to be signed, and that would be the end of Deputy Benda. *Behind the backs of the people, he sponsored a nest of Nazis. . . .* He, who had helped to kill more of the German lice than the whole membership of the parliamentary club of the Communists could claim for itself! But what did that count for? Here were the photographers and the searing tongues of flame.

Crash! The roof of one of the furnace halls was caving in, a dense stream of sparks shot up to the skies, and the blackened beams were falling down, cracking, splintering, and filling the empty windows with strange darts of light.

So he had worked and slaved and talked himself hoarse and licked people's boots until his tongue felt rotten and sore, in order to have and possess and hold what was consuming itself and collapsing before his own eyes! What fun someone must be having with him — that he ruled without possessing, that he could hold only what was being worked, and that he could work it only with the forces which had to destroy it!

It was a story for Thomas to write, a great and tragic story, if Thomas would only see it! Thomas's face was distorted by the blaze, his eyes were like dark caves, and the hollows of his face were spreading. Thomas was coming up to him. Thomas's lips were moving, but the sounds he produced were drowned out by the hissing of the steam, the roar of the fire, the swishing of the water from the hoses.

"What?" cried Joseph. "What were you saying?"

"This is cruel!" Thomas said. "Horrible!"

"That much I know. . . ."

"Can't we do anything?"

"Yes, you can do something, Thomas. You can leave me alone."

Thomas recoiled.

I shouldn't have said it, thought Joseph. I'm sorry.

Thomas smiled resignedly. "When I said *Get rid of the Germans!* you sneered at me —"

Joseph walked away. He pulled down his hat to keep it from being blown off in the gushes of warm wind caused by the flames. He saw Karel bandaging the hand of a fireman. He saw the line of fire fighters retreat and take up new positions, like an army in the field, to concentrate on the second furnace hall — which was still standing although ribbons of fire were leaping around its corners and lapping through holes in its roof. He saw streams of water converge on it, forming a higher roof of spray and gases, he saw people moving inside and ladders go up and arms waving and pumps turning. He saw Kravat.

Krvat was in his shirt sleeves. His eyes were gleaming through the smudges on his face, and light and shadows played a merry-go-round over the hair on his chest. Kravat knew more about furnaces and their vulnerable spots than did the fire chiefs from Martinice and Rodnik and Limberk; with one arm, muscles bulging, he was holding on to the rungs of a ladder; with the other, he was directing the stream of a hose. When the stream hit the edge he wanted covered, he climbed down.

The white under the smudges, Joseph noted with some satisfaction, was

unnatural. Kravat was using his sleeve to wipe the cold sweat off his forehead. Sweat! thought Joseph. Go ahead, sweat! I'll make you sweat! If they pull me down, and they're going to, I'll pull you down with me, if it's the last thing I do!

Karel, having finished bandaging the fireman, came over, took one look at Kravat, and said, "Put on my coat! What d'you want to do — get pneumonia?" He tried to hang his coat over Kravat's shoulders. With an impatient move, Kravat shook it off and turned to the fire chiefs who, like generals after the battle is joined, stood waiting. He looked at the ladder, longingly. Perhaps if he went up again, directed another stream of water, did something, anything . . .

"It's too late for that, Mr. Kravat, don't you see?" said Joseph cuttingly. "Where was the watchman?"

Krvatat shivered. He permitted Karel to put the coat over him.

"Why do you think I put you in charge here?" Joseph continued. "To make you feel important? To have you celebrate a big Christmas and get drunk? I thought I could trust you to keep those miserable Germans in check . . ."

"Stop it now, Joseph!" Karel ordered. "The police tell me that Ebbing is one of the men they're holding."

Joseph began to laugh, hysterically. "Some brother I've got! Go ahead, Karel, go ahead! Stick in the knife! Twist it! Tell me I laid the fire myself!"

A great shout rose from the side. Men were running back frantically, ladders were being pulled out of the way, sweat-streaked faces flashed by. The fire chiefs had thrown themselves into the melee, bellowing commands. Then there was a long, low rumbling as the wall of furnace hall Number One cracked, buckled, and collapsed. For a moment, the dome of the furnace with the black cross on top stood out sharply against a purple glow. A screen of dust and smoke and ashes reared itself and hid the cross. When it settled, the furnace was gone, buried under piles of flaming rubble.

"Mr. Benda" — Kravat's voice came through quietly — "shall we try to settle the question of responsibility a little later? I want to help save the other furnace."

"You will not resign! Not under any circumstances!"

Dolezhal's screaming hurt Joseph's aching head. He held the ear phone farther away. Even so, the piercing voice reverberated.

"If you resign, you admit your guilt! You play into their hands — they'll use it — nationalization . . ."

Joseph was tired. Morning had come, the fire engines were gone, and

through the smoke-grimed window of the office building which had remained untouched, he saw the ruins.

"You will not resign!" Dolezhal was saying again. It was obvious that the Minister, too, was shaken, because better than anyone else he could foresee the political consequences of the incendiarism. "You will stay and face the music and fight it out in the district."

"Yes," said Joseph tonelessly, "I guess I will have to."

"I'll do everything to protect you on this end — I'll get our press to put the finger on that fellow Kravat — but I will do nothing, absolutely nothing, for a quitter! Do you understand?!"

"I understand."

He understood all right. He heard Dolezhal's phone click off and, for a few seconds, listened to the empty breath of the wires. He had his orders; but he felt too beaten to move.

Lida came in with a cup of coffee which she had raised somewhere. He drank the hot brew gratefully. He rubbed his stubbles and said, "And no barbershop open this morning, either."

Her flat nose seemed to have sunk deeper into her face, and her skin was pasty from lack of sleep.

"You can shave at home," she said. "It's all over. What did Dolezhal say?"

"I offered to resign."

"You didn't!"

"He talked me out of it," he answered with a brittle, sickly laugh.

"Oh, Joseph . . ." She put her arms around him and kissed his eyes and his forehead. "It will all be rebuilt. At Government expense."

He laughed again. "The bright side of things, I suppose?"

"It was sheer insanity to offer to resign. Did you actually believe things would always continue rolling your way?"

"No," he said. "Did they ever?"

But the coffee, and Dolezhal's promise of help and her tenderness were beginning to soothe him. "Where's Petra?" he asked. "What a Christmas for the poor kid!"

"I sent her back to Roduik, with Karel and Thomas and Kitty. They took the early morning bus. So we have the car."

"Good! Shall we go, then?"

"Unless you want to wish Kravat a Merry Christmas, there's nothing for us to do here."

"No, I don't want to," he said.

As they slowly drove through Martinice, he saw that the curtains had come off some of the houses, and that the windows were empty, and the doors locked with official finality. The exodus of the Germans had begun.

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He slept a few hours and shaved and then went up to the house on St. Nepomuk.

Kitty received him with a mourner's solicitude, led him into the sitting room, and called Thomas. Thomas was serious, his face peaked; the fire obviously had jolted him out of the rarefied atmosphere of ideas into the filthy, dirty life of people who work with their hands.

"I came to apologize," said Joseph. "I was rude. I was wrong. Facts have proved that I was wrong. So I came to tell you."

This confession could not have come easy, thought Kitty. It must have cost Joseph a lot to humble himself before Thomas, whom since time immemorial he had secretly considered his creation.

A strand of Thomas's hair fell over his forehead, and he brushed it back impatiently. "Last night . . ." he said. "They sure lit a tree for us, those Germans!"

Joseph didn't want him to go off on that subject. He had said that he'd been wrong, hadn't he? That was enough. Or perhaps not. Perhaps he should humor Thomas, listen to his ramblings. He should — but not today!

"You once helped me," he said. "You helped to elect me with your statement on freedom."

A sardonic smile crept up around Thomas's lips. "Kitty, would you please bring me my copy of the manuscript?"

Joseph suppressed his exasperation. He had not come up here to sit through a reading from Thomas's book. He had come to grasp at a straw; but even this straw had a life and a will of its own, or the waves that carried it had.

Kitty returned with a large folder. Thomas took it and all but caressed it.

"It looks thin," he said, "like nothing."

Joseph fished for something appropriate to say. His mind was empty of compliments.

Thomas opened the folder and paused on the second page. "This is from the introduction," he said.

"I'm listening."

"Freedom, of all human ideals, is the most elusive. Perhaps this is why so many have written it on their banner and gone out to speak and to battle in its name. But banners fade quickly, words become divorced from reality and lose their meaning, and the battle may be fought for something quite different from the pronouncements of the leaders and their apostles. Never look at the flags; look at who fights under them."

"Very good," said Joseph, "very well put. . . ." He had not listened too closely. "It's got the Thomas Benda verve and the rhythm I love so much. But why read just this to me?"

Thomas closed the folder and laid it on the small table next to him.

"What do you want, Joseph?"

"I want help."

"What kind of help?"

"You know what's going to come after this fire, Thomas — they'll exploit it. They'll blame me for it. They'll gang up on me. And I stand all alone."

Even his voice was thin and stale. Thomas felt the fear in it and the isolation; he felt them deeply. He'd lived in fear and isolation while he wrote his book. And he would live in fear and isolation even after it was published and began to corrode the smug formulas and comfortable phrases which people had come to accept and relax in as they did in the old mattresses on their beds.

"But you have a whole party in back of you," he suggested, "and Dolezhal, and a string of newspapers."

Joseph spread his palms as if he wanted to show how empty his hands were. "Whatever they do, or say, will be done and said to protect themselves. You're the only person I know who can speak up for me, for my sake. . . ."

Kitty brushed aside the thought that Thomas might resent her intrusion, and said, "You will do it, Thomas, won't you? Why, we were all together, under the tree, in Rodnik, when the fire started in Martinice —"

Thomas twisted in his chair. "I owe you my life, Joseph. I owe to you that I am a writer. But you're as guilty of the destruction of the Hammer Works as if you had laid the fire yourself."

Joseph's shoulders slumped. "Maybe you ought to get together with Karel and work out the details of that theory."

"Karel?" said Kitty. "But Karel doesn't think —"

"No, he doesn't. . . . It was just a sad joke about another Benda who's failing me." Joseph's mouth was bitter. He had had no great illusions as to the value of a word from Thomas in a conflict which went to the very roots of people's economic existence. It had been a sentimental thing. It would have broken the ring of events that were choking him. "I had to produce," he said hopelessly. "What could I do?"

"I wish I could tell you. . . ." Thomas was thinking of the statement he had been made to write, and of the contract that had been handed him in return. "We all carry dirt on our hands and cannot complain if it gets into our food and galls it."

"I'm a simple man," said Joseph, "with a simple belief in simple loyalties. And sometimes I cannot follow your philosophy. I'll own up — I'm left with practically nothing of my beliefs."

The reproach cut, though it had been delivered softly. Thomas said heatedly, "You kept the Germans at Hammer because you thought it was

a clever thing to do. You used them — some say for production, some say for the good of the country, and some, for yourself. But they are evil, and nothing can come from them but evil; and now it has come, and we are suffering for it — ”

“God damn it!” Joseph jumped up. “You nauseate me, you and your holier-than-thou attitude!”

He stomped out, grabbing his coat and his hat. But as he walked down the path from the house to his car, his flurry of strength left him again; his feet slowed down, his body sagged.

Kitty, her face constrained, stood at the window, looking after him. Thomas stepped next to her and took her hand. She withdrew it.

“How could you be so callous!” she said.

He saw his brother, an old man, trudge down the path. “I warned him about the Germans, didn’t I?” he defended himself.

“Call him back!” she asked—and as she saw him shut up tight within himself, she said, “I don’t understand you. . . .”

“No,” he said sadly, “you don’t.” Whatever it was he had preserved made him no happier.

CHAPTER THREE

NOT ONLY food was short this winter, but coal was, too. The two old stoves in the corners of the Rodnik auditorium were cold, and the men sat huddled in their overcoats. A steady soft drumming persisted under the hum of voices as the workers pushed alternately the tips and the heels of their boots on the wooden floor to keep the circulation in their feet going. The drumming went on even as Kravat opened the meeting.

Karel had been held up by a case, and he and Thomas arrived late. Kravat, standing at the rim of the platform, was already in the middle of his opening. He nodded toward Karel, who was taking Thomas to a seat in the rear. As Works Doctor, Karel was part of the crew and had been invited as a matter of course — as had been Joseph, who sat conspicuously in front, arms folded, his head somewhat inclined toward the speaker.

Thomas tried not to notice the critical glances that seemed to say: What does he want here? This is a glassworkers’ meeting, not a Benda family affair. “Thanks for taking me,” he whispered to Karel, and went on — about Joseph’s plea to him, and about why he felt that this meeting bore on his “Essay on Freedom.”

Karel hissed, "Don't thank me — thank Kravat. And keep quiet." Karel wanted to listen and think. He was struck by the difference between this meeting and the pre-election shindig that had climaxed in Joseph's goulash soup. The boisterousness, the cheer, the indulgence, the joviality, had disappeared. In their place had emerged a certain embittered concentration, a hardness, a consciousness of purpose. It could not be explained by saying that then it had been spring while now it was winter, or that then children and women had sat with their men while now only a few women were in the hall, and these members of the union. And although the agenda of the meeting affected the lives of all the men present, and the life of the town and the life of the industry, in itself it was not a sufficient reason for the new temper. The tensions that rent his family and his country, and that grew sharper with every passing day and event, had marked themselves on the faces and in the attitudes of the people.

Karel was not sure whether to be glad of it or not. He sensed that even here in Rodnik, small as it was and far from the mainstream of the capital, matters were pressing toward an eruption which might clear the air; but there had been enough violence in his life to make him fear it.

Only part of Kravat's words had seeped through Karel's reflections; with a start he discovered how closely Kravat's speech paralleled his own thinking.

"The fire at the Hammer Works," Kravat was winding up, "was a political act, springing from political motives, and possible only through political mistakes, those of our own and those of others. Aside from the police measures which will have to be taken, it will have to be dealt with on a political level. However, and I want this clearly understood, this is not our task today."

He was no longer the man who had gone out pilfering with Karel and who had stated that he liked doing things on his own hook for the fun of it. It seemed to Karel that the fire had burned out not only buildings and machines, but also the remnants of the man's vagaries.

"When we took over the furnaces, we took over responsibilities. Ours were not only the benefits of common ownership — security in our jobs, a greater share in the profits, a voice in the production process — ours were its obligations."

Karel leaned over to Thomas. "Are you following him?"

"What do you think I'm doing?"

Karel wanted him to listen closely. Perhaps from here, from these unsmiling men, would come something which would have for Thomas more than a bearing on his essay — something more than an intellectual exercise.

"And because of these obligations" — Kravat raised his voice — "the problem which the catastrophe of Martinice has placed before us cannot

be left to the Government alone, or to the leadership of the industry, or to the men in the Works Council, or to the National Administrator. They are waiting to hear what we have to propose, so that they can base their actions on what we can do. It is a simple question of bread — bread for us, and bread for the country. We know that our glass is exported all over the world, and that we must exchange it for the wheat that dried up on our fields. We must make up for the loss of production. And we must rebuild the Hammer Works. These, I think, are our points for tonight.”

He sat down behind a table that had been placed on the platform.

The soft tapping of the feet, which had lasted throughout Kravat’s programmatic talk, stopped. In the cold, bare hall, the oppressive weight of the task became tangible. And with it came the urge to throw it off; or if that was not possible, to throw the blame on someone for the grind and the privations ahead.

A voice sounded from the dark recesses of the hall. “Make up for production — right! Rebuild — right! And throw out Joseph Benda!”

Karel saw Joseph’s shoulders jerk. Stamping feet and clapping hands seconded the idea from several sides. The whole thing was highly irregular, and would become more so if Kravat didn’t step in and channel the meeting back into the constructive business he had outlined.

Krvat knocked his knuckles on the table. “If anybody wishes the floor, I’ll recognize him after he raises his hand!”

But he failed to proclaim that this was not a gathering to depose Joseph.

A hand went up, and a gray-haired man rose. It was Viteslav Czerny, the team master. Czerny loosened his muffler, and said, “I remember Blaha. Most of us do. As far as I’m concerned, I’ve been thinking ever since about him dying there, and the whys and wherefores of it.”

The shuffling feet were quick. Somebody coughed long and hollowly and spat.

“And now we had the fire, and this time it isn’t just a man who was burned, but the livelihood of a couple of hundred people. I imagine that none of this would have happened if the furnaces were still privately owned. The owner would have made damned sure that he wouldn’t have to pay indemnities, and that his property remained intact and in tiptop shape.”

Czerny stuck his hands into his pockets and raised his chin in a defiant gesture.

“Now, do I say that we should return the furnaces to Mr. Benda? Am I crazy in the head? I don’t think so. But I do say we never took them away from him! You don’t use the fox who stole and killed your chickens as Administrator of your chicken coop, do you?”

There were shouts of “No!” and some laughs.

“This is nothing against Mr. Benda personally. He’s a great specialist in

glass, and I've seen him make glass with his own hands. I even voted for him when he wanted to be elected for Parliament. But let him stay in Prague, in the Assembly, and let him help give us a decent Constitution — and let him keep out of our factories!"

With a self-righteous nod, he sat down. Karel saw Kravat glance in Joseph's direction. But Joseph's arms remained folded; perhaps he felt that the attack was so unjust that it defeated itself; or he could be waiting for more of the same and would answer all of it at once — or maybe he was so dejected that he had decided to let it rain down on him, to leave them to their futile recriminations.

Kravat didn't consider the recriminations futile — Karel was certain of that. Kravat was building up to something, probably a grand blow to finish Joseph once and for all; Kravat would have to have the patience of a donkey and the forbearance of an angel to forget what Joseph had accused him of on the night of the fire. And yet, Kravat was wrong. Kravat had staked out the competence of the meeting. No plan for production would come from a symposium of denunciations; not a single nail would be driven into a scaffold at the Hammer Works by permitting the men to vent their spleen on Joseph.

"Yes — the man over there in the ninth row!" Kravat pointed. "You, Blatnik!"

Blatnik got up slowly. He was heavy-set and dark-haired, with a pronounced jaw. He was a worker who had not spent the major part of his life with the Bendas, but had come to Rodnik and been hired by Joseph after the war.

Blatnik said, "I don't like to correct an older and more experienced fellow worker. But this is a grave matter and we must know what we're talking about. Master Czerny told us that we took the furnaces and gave them right back to Joseph Benda. Well, we took them, but we didn't really give them back — we just kept Joseph Benda around and kind of dangled them before his nose."

Karel could see Blatnik's profile — a determined face, realistic, with an uncompromising intelligence. In his few words, Blatnik had described Joseph's exact quandary.

"What did you expect the man to do — drool his heart out and be big about it? Of course he would try to get them back, this way or that — I don't know, I don't know the ways of the capitalists — but they're like you and me when it comes to money. The Works were nationalized, when — October 1945? And in a few days it will be 1948: Over two years of having to live with what's yours without being able to get at it . . ."

What was Blatnik trying to do? Take Czerny's words, the words of a man disappointed in his belief in another, and set them straight and prove

by the application of a little common sense that Joseph should be relieved of his job? It might be the best and most humane way of settling the question, thought Karel, because it was obvious that there was no longer much confidence in Joseph. And it might be the quickest way to close the touchy subject and to force Kravat to get down to the business on hand.

"Two years," said Blatnik, "a long time. Enough time for even a capitalist to learn that he's out and that what he once owned or wanted to own has changed hands — has changed into our hands. What do you expect the man to do — submit himself to the new conditions? Is that possible?"

"No!" from various parts of the floor.

"No!" repeated Blatnik. "Of course not. So what is his natural feeling? This: If I can't have it, the bastards who took it away from me shouldn't have it either."

Krvat sat leaning over the table, scratching his cheek. It was clear to Karel that Kravat knew the drift — and yet he wasn't stopping it.

"So there is your fire!" Blatnik's jaw was shoved forward, hard, challenging. "Of course he wouldn't do the dirty work himself — the Nazis were good enough for that. And whether he fixed it with them, or whether he just figured that they would do something like it before we kicked them out of the country -- who knows? I say, before we talk about production and rebuilding, let's watch out that the Benda Works don't burn down, too!"

Karel saw Thomas's hand clamp the edge of his seat. Thomas's eyes were fixed on Blatnik and he kept whispering, more to himself than to Karel, "Freedom . . . That's their freedom . . ."

Blatnik had ended. In the interval of silence that followed, the men were weighing the charge and being swayed between the speaker's logic and their own hesitations. No criminals themselves, they were reluctant to see a criminal in another man — a man whom they had known so long and for whom they had worked.

But the reluctance grew tenuous. Karel still hoped that Kravat would say something to reverse the trend. Even if Joseph had wanted to hold men like Ebbing, and even if Ebbing was one of the arsonists — which could not be proved — it was utter nonsense to think of Joseph as an active participant in such a plot. The recriminations solved nothing. Kindling the mob spirit solved nothing. Violence against Joseph solved nothing — and Kravat, of all the men present, certainly knew it.

Krvat seemed to be waiting. Joseph stayed pasted to his bench while the slow anger of the men brewed and thickened and clotted around him.

Then came the first cries.

"Joseph Benda! What about it?" "Come on, show us your face!" "Blaha wasn't enough, was he?" "Arsonist, eh?"

These were the men who had eaten his bread.

"Hey, Deputy, lost your tongue?" "Burn our furnaces and grow rich on it!" "How did you arrange it? Give us the details!"

These were the men who had shaken his hand.

"Saboteur!" "Murderer!"

These were the men who had smiled at him when he was knee-high.

Kravat leaped out of his chair. He raised his hands for order. "Mr. Benda!" he shouted over the noise. "Do you want to reply?"

Joseph got up. It took him a second or two before his voice would come, and then it rumbled hoarsely from his chest, difficult to understand.

"Whatever I have done — or not done —"

His hand reached for support, found none, fell.

"I have not sunk as low as you have!" He gritted his teeth in an effort to control himself. Some of his color returned; his words were more distinct when he spoke again. "I choose not to defend myself — before a mob!"

The men were on their feet.

Joseph climbed on his bench so as to keep his shoulders and head above them. He looked around contemptuously and stared them into a moment's quiet. Then he turned toward the platform, "As for you, Kravat — you will hear from the Ministry!"

The men let go. "Ministry — hell!" "So we're a mob!" "He doesn't choose to defend himself!"

Blatnik, too, had mounted a bench and was shouting something. Kravat was pounding the table, "Order! Order! Order!"

Then Karel was on the stage, next to Kravat. His hat had been lost in the struggle to get up there, his gray hair was disarranged, his gaunt face, usually calm, was livid.

"Order!" shouted Kravat. "Quiet for the doctor!"

The men saw Karel. They had never seen him like this. They had seen him in their homes, at their bedsides, or at the bedsides of their wives and children. They had seen him in the infirmary at Benda, they had stood before him, holding out their wrists, or watching him as he listened to the mysterious sounds in their chests. They had felt the touch of his long, thin hands which were now lifted against them and their inordinate outbreak.

The men started to move back to their places.

"Blatnik — you sit down, too!" Karel commanded. And to Joseph who seemed undecided what to do, "You stay. We'll need you."

Joseph regarded him doubtfully. Then, as if all his own will were gone, he tremblingly found his seat.

"I'm ashamed," said Karel, "for all of you here. I'm ashamed for my friend Kravat who has let his personal feelings run away with him, against his own better intentions. And I don't want to have to be ashamed for men with whom I have worked and with whom I want to work in the future."

"Another Benda!" grumbled Blatnik audibly. "Nothing but Bendas. It makes me sick!"

"It does?" said Karel. "See me after the meeting."

Some of the men laughed — but at Blatnik.

"If you're sick, call the doctor. If you think a man is a criminal, call the police. If you think you have a case against him, there are courts of law. If you want to get rid of your manager, or of your National Administrator, you are the union, you decide it, and you report so to your headquarters in Prague and to the Government. Am I right, Kravat?"

Kravat's head moved in assent. He felt ill-at-ease. He had wanted to give Joseph a long-deserved lesson. But somewhere along the line, the lesson had run away with the meeting and himself; somewhere, he'd made a serious mistake.

Karel stepped to the edge of the stage. "Now, apparently, you want to assess the blame for what happened at Martinice, and you're entitled to that. You are the men who will have to carry the main burden for making up what was lost there. We know it was arson, and we know that the fire was laid by one or more of the Germans in Martinice. They weren't satisfied with what they did to us during the war and the occupation. They had to add another crime to their list before we could banish them from our country forever."

Karel noticed that the men were beginning to hang on his words, like the sick whom he had shepherded from Buchenwald camp to the sanatorium in the mountains of Thuringia and back home to Prague.

"So if you must blame someone for the fire and the destruction, blame those who stood by while the Germans were allowed to live and to work in Martinice, through all this time. Blame yourselves. There's only one man in this hall who ever protested against it, and that's my brother Thomas. But my brother Joseph, and Kravat, and I, and every single one of you — What did we ever do about it? Did any one of you ever offer to move to Martinice and work there and help Kravat and my brother? The handful of Czechs employed at the Hammer Works came from somewhere else. Maybe it's the Government's fault. But who is the Government? We are. So, again, it's our fault. And because it is, and because Blatnik and Master Czerny and Kravat and all of you feel that it is, you're trying to push it all

on one man. That may be the natural way in which the human mind works, but it's not just, and it's not right."

He had succeeded in shoving the men back to a sensible consideration of their problem and their facts. They were knocking their feet on the floor to warm them, and the cold damp air again was filling with the smoke of cheap tobacco.

"Now I don't know enough about the making of glass to help you with the proposals that are expected from you — the proposals that will have to come from this meeting, as Kravat has pointed out to you. . . ."

He floundered. He tried to smile. He had really said everything he had to say.

"Thank you all," he concluded.

He wanted to hurry off the platform, but had to permit Kravat to grasp his hand while the men applauded and some remarked loudly, "Very true!" and, "That's how it is!" and, "Good for our doctor!"

Finally Kravat let go of him, and he went back through the aisle to Thomas, looking neither right nor left, intent on merging once more with the background and on listening to the discussion he hoped would follow.

It was subdued at first, but became more alive and faster with every suggestion the workers made. They volunteered overtime at the Benda Works. They pledged to reduce the rate of rejects and to increase the speed of their work. They offered to organize brigades and to help rebuild the Hammer Works. They formed delegations to be sent to other glass furnaces in the country in order to tell what had happened and to ask further help. They made motions and voted on them and named committees and even listened to some pointers Joseph threw in, and acted on them. They were grave and busy and inventive and practical and enthusiastic. They closed the meeting with a resolution to guard the property of the people like the apple of their eye from this point on, because watching over and increasing the property of the people was a worker's most noble function and the essence of democracy.

As the men walked out of the auditorium, stamping their feet and beating their arms around their chests, Thomas turned to Karel. "You know," he said, "I'm a coward. I should have spoken. I should have defended Joseph. Not because he came to me the other day and asked me to, but because all that happened tonight — the mob, and democracy, and discipline, and my emotions, and yours, and Joseph's — all this was blue-printed in my mind and is graphed out on paper, in my book. But here, I was frightened and disgusted by them. . . ."

He waited for Karel's reaction.

Then he went on, "You're probably a greater person than I. You did something —"

Karel cut him off. "I'm not certain I did the right thing," he said.

"Why not?"

Karel dusted his hat which he had recovered from under an aisle seat. "They usually have a damned good instinct — " he pointed at the last men pressing out through the door.

"That's ridiculous! To tie Joseph up with the fire — "

Karel shook his head. "I mean — perhaps our conception of the word sabotage is too narrow — "

He broke off. Joseph was coming to thank him.

CHAPTER FOUR

ALTHOUGH the prospectus made its old claims, the Declerques Institute had ceased to be a boarding school proper. Mademoiselle Declerques still issued beautifully printed diplomas; her pupils, however, no longer spent the better part of their day in the spacious, gloomy old house in Vinohrady — a section of Prague formerly known as the Royal Vineyards — but had to attend the crowded, ugly schools of the State.

Mademoiselle Declerques refused to admit that her grandeur had gone out with the Hapsburgs. She felt a bitter pride in her Institute, the last of its kind in the capital. Of course, her wards of today were not the young countesses and baronesses of the past — they were daughters of wholesalers, ex-bankers, lawyers, and others distinguished more by their wealth than their blood. Nevertheless, she tried to maintain as much of the old spirit as she could, and she had her pupils concentrate their remaining hours on undoing the harm they had suffered in their contact with the ruder classes.

In this endeavor, Count Arkadij Tolstov was her mainstay. The Count's joints creaked with a rheumatism which he was said to have acquired leading a regiment of Cossacks against the Reds in 1919. His title was rather vague, as was his connection with the well-known family of the same name; but he enabled Mademoiselle to advise the parents of a potential pupil that their child would learn poise, posture, and the waltz from a direct descendant of the author of *Anna Karenina*.

Coarse financial considerations had forced Mademoiselle to recast most of the rest of her staff and to lower not only the social but also the scholastic standards of her boarders. When the law came through which said that all children of Czechoslovakia would have to go to schools of the State, Mademoiselle Declerques's Institute had to become a glorified cramming school for moneyed young females. This, in turn, meant a switch of em-

phasis from fencing and needle point and manners and the gentler arts to mathematics and other harsh disciplines. It brought to the Institute a new type of instructor, like Vlasta Rehan, who was definitely plebeian but who knew how to explain the Pythagorean principle so that even the biggest dunce could memorize it for the next term test.

It also meant that the few intelligent boarders, dumped on the Institute by parents who resided out of town or were divorced or otherwise incapable of coping with a child, formed an unruly, unhappy, contrary clique of their own, raised havoc with the nerves and the time-hallowed ways of the old lady, and questioned and doubted everything.

Petra had become the leader of this set as soon as she snapped out of her original depression at coming to Prague and saw that her exile did not necessarily involve a betrayal by Karel. In one way, Mademoiselle was an accessory to the fact that Petra was able to make herself undisputed chief of the malcontents. Child of a deputy and pet of a Minister, she took in Mademoiselle's mind the place which, thirty years ago, the illegitimate daughter of Archduke Ferdinand Karl had held — she ranked the others, so to speak; she was a publicity asset for the Institute, and she was rarely disciplined.

And then there was Vlasta Rehan, tragic Vlasta. Outwardly unbending, her black, smooth hair worn close to her skull, her ascetic, pale face always carried high, she was strictly equable toward her students; and yet, through a warmth that flashed into her gray, even eyes, through a sudden motion, a slightly different tone of voice, she seemed to favor Petra. Vlasta never punished. Vlasta could make even the most insensitive of girls obey and work to the point of collapse by merely talking softly and looking at her questioningly and unsmilingly.

There were many rumors about her, and they contributed to her natural aura. Her lover, the story went, had been tortured to death by the Nazis. She was supposed to have been raped by a high Gestapo official and to have killed him with her bare hands. She never talked of these things, but she did wear a simple, heart-shaped silver medallion inside of which was believed to be a photo miniature or a lock of hair or some other memento of the man she had lost. The known facts were that she was dirt-poor and worked for Mademoiselle at a pitiable salary because she refused public stipends and had to have a place to live and food to eat while she finished her studies at Charles University. "In these times," she once said, "the Government can find more profitable use for its funds."

Petra, whose formal education had large gaps going back to the war and her inability to adjust herself to Rodnik, sat through her first lesson with Vlasta Rehan without saying a word and without paying much attention to the lecture and the examples on the blackboard. She was wrapped

up in the voice and would have given up her best black-market dress to know that this voice was directed only to her. After class, when the other girl who had shared the lesson was gone, Vlasta called Petra over and said, "Petra Benda, you must listen and learn. Life is better if we know what it's about. You understand that, don't you?"

"I do." Petra felt as she did in church — oh, much more than that; the Reverend Trnka had never caused such deep, almost agonizing shivers to go down her spine.

"So, don't gape at me!" Vlasta concluded severely. She saw Petra's eyes cloud over and withdraw into themselves. She was sorry for the girl. It was to Vlasta, at this moment, as if she had caught a glance at herself, a much younger self, on the other side of the gulf of the war years — yet unmistakably herself, reaching out for some sort of love and companionship, and finding herself rebuffed.

She laid a light hand on Petra's hair. "You may come to me whenever you feel it is necessary."

Petra came often, with or without good reason, and was always welcomed; but she was never quite certain whether she was liked for her own sake. It puzzled and frustrated her. Then Petra detected that Vlasta showed displeasure at the frequent visits to Dolezhal. To Petra, this displeasure was not disagreeable at all — it was a happy discovery. From that point on she told Vlasta at length and in detail of the attentions the Minister showered on her, exaggerating in some degree so as to watch the darkening of Vlasta's face and the hasty shadows of disquiet that moved across it. She described the Minister's small, soft, white hand and how it felt when he touched her, and observed Vlasta's throat constrict in ill-concealed disgust. It was the chink in Vlasta's armor. Petra did not bother about why this was so; it was enough for her to have found it and to exploit it and to enjoy being the object of personal concern.

After some months, Vlasta Rehan stepped over the limits of teacher-pupil relationship and began to invite Petra to go out with her on Wednesdays or Saturdays, which were free evenings at Mademoiselle Declerques's. They would visit the Valdstyn Gardens or walk up Hradcany Hill to the Castle, or take in a movie or go to a meeting where Petra heard men, or women, speak of socialism, and nationalization — words she knew well from back home, but which seemed to have a quite different meaning among the people in these large, noisy, badly ventilated halls.

Once, they went to the amusement park near Havlicek Square and rode on the Ferris wheel, swaying high above the earth, holding on to one another, laughing and being afraid at the same time. At such moments, Vlasta's face was no longer ascetic but serene and animated by a happiness which made Petra happy, too.

Joseph knew little of Vlasta. Petra had mentioned her to him, along with Arkadij Tolstoy and the quirks of Mademoiselle.

In addition to the fee for board and tuition, the parents paid Mademoiselle a certain amount as pocket money for her charges. A part of this was given to the girls to be invested in candy and movie tickets and other unecessaries. The larger share was held by Mademoiselle to pay for the monthly visits to the opera, to serious concerts, or to reliable classic dramas; for such small emergencies as the loss of a schoolbook or the replacement of a doily in the cubicles which served the girls as personal quarters; and for presents on birthdays or saints' days — and these presents, though paid for by the pupils themselves, were never imaginative but always practical.

The money was kept on Mademoiselle's desk, in a locked tin box whose paint had come off at the edges; the money was accounted for down to the last crown; yet it was a permanent bone of contention between Mademoiselle and her boarders. The share of which the girls could dispose was so small as to permit no real splurge. If one of them came to plead for a little more of what belonged to her, Mademoiselle demanded an exact report on why the private share had been spent so soon, and for what precisely the requested sum was to be used.

Petra gathered the malcontents, because the Ferris wheel had upset her budget and because she judged the time ripe. Outside the Declerques Institute, life was breathing into the regular schools of the State; a good part of the students were organizing in councils and talked in the classrooms as did their fathers in the unions. Only here, in the secluded house on the former Royal Vineyards, the Old Crow ruled as if the country had never gone through a revolution against the Hapsburgs, a war, an occupation, and another revolution.

Petra remembered what she had heard at the meetings to which Vlasta had taken her. "Let's organize this place!" she said. "Let's make up our demands — so: Number One, our pocket money is ours, and we get all of it to do with as we like; Number Two, every evening and all of Sunday are free. We work hard enough in the real schools and with our tutors here; we've earned our free time. Number Three — you name it, we'll get it; collective action will get it for us. Let's appoint a delegation and vote on the proposal. And if the Old Crow doesn't back down, we'll go on strike."

"How?"

"We won't eat the stuff she puts on the table. It's horrible, anyhow. We'll just throw it back at her."

"Really? Really throw it?"

Petra had visions of the evil-tasting pap they got for breakfast being pasted all over Mademoiselle's dainty, wrinkled face, and said, "Why not? It'll teach her. And we just won't show up for lessons, even if we like" — she stopped, but then went on — "even if we like the instructor. It's for the common good."

"Will you head the delegation?"

"Of course!"

"And will you speak for us?"

"Yes."

She was not afraid. In union there was strength. And she was the daughter of a deputy and the friend of a Minister, and Mademoiselle would think twice before permitting a scandal to develop.

Arkadij Tolstoy wondered why everything went wrong this afternoon. "Young ladies!" he clapped his hands, "att-ention!"

Mademoiselle frowningly repeated the opening bars of "The Blue Danube." The first couple — a tall, pimply-faced girl who perspired profusely, and a little one with plump calves and a blond, toupée-like hairdo — stepped off.

"*One* — two three! *One* — two three!" Arkadij Tolstoy was shouting, stamping his stiff leg on the *One*. In the rear of the dance studio, a suppressed giggle rippled through the waiting couples. Someone imitated Arkadij's throaty accent, "*Von* — tu tree! *Von* — tu tree!"

The second couple came forward, lost the rhythm, and stopped, convulsed with laughter.

The music stopped, too.

Mademoiselle stood up and pulled her ruffles down over her flat chest. "It is in very bad taste to ridicule a person's habits, traits, weaknesses. The girl who said '*Von* — tu tree' will be punished by a 50 per cent reduction of her personal allowance, not for her lack of discipline, but for her display of bad taste. Well?"

Her pin-point eyes slowly made the rounds.

No one volunteered.

"Well?"

Petra knew it was a question of leadership, even though, for a change, she had not been the one who had mimicked Arkadij.

"Mademoiselle!" she said.

"The class is dismissed. You will see me in my office. Petra — now!"

Mademoiselle Declerques picked up her big book of *Simple Waltzes with Fingering*, pressed it under her arm, and marched out, trailed by Count Tolstoy.

"Girls!" called Petra. "The time has come."

Hesitantly, the three who had been nominated to serve with her on the delegation joined her. They walked down the flight of stairs, silent and composed and with a tight feeling in their stomachs. The others clustered at some distance behind, like white mice in a laboratory cage when the gloved hand reaches in.

Mademoiselle glanced up from behind the tin box at the three with Petra. "And what do *you* want?"

"They're with me," said Petra. "We're a delegation."

Mademoiselle Declerques rose. She was shorter than Petra, and thinner.

"Delegation?" She tried to estimate the full significance of this. "You've brought a delegation to have a public for my lecture on your bad taste?"

"The delegation is here to submit our demands."

"Demands! . . . That is in even worse taste," said Mademoiselle. "Shall I phone your father?"

"He isn't in Prague," Petra informed her brightly. "The Assembly is hardly ever in session on week ends, Mademoiselle."

Mademoiselle frowned at her calendar. Of all days it had to be Saturday. She stepped around her desk to get closer to the revolutionary center. She had intended to have a heart-to-heart talk with Petra and then magnanimously to rescind her punishment, because she didn't want to antagonize Deputy Benda or the Minister. Her kindly intentions had been wrecked, and she was faced with a revolt which she had to put down, here and now. And if she knew Deputy Benda and Minister Dolezhal, they would heartily approve.

"All right!" she said. "Let me have your demands!"

Petra felt that this tiny person would not be such a pushover. But she had to proceed, now. She took a deep breath.

"First, our pocket money is to be ours, all of it, forever. Second, every evening and all of Sunday is free time. Third —"

Mademoiselle's wrinkles multiplied. "First — not granted! Second — not granted! Nothing granted! All four of you are deprived of your total month's allowance. Now, who are the others who sent you? The names! I want the names! All of them!"

There was in Mademoiselle an elemental, terrifying force which entangled Petra's thoughts. She felt the fear in the involuntary backward motion of the other three girls, and she knew she must speak out or accept irrevocably all that Mademoiselle would decide to mete out to her. Frightened, she tried to recall Karel's face, and Vlasta's, and to derive strength from them, and to think what they would say.

"The names!" demanded Mademoiselle.

"We'll go on strike!" Petra blurted out. "We won't eat! We won't go to lectures! We won't —"

The slap across her face burned and stung. Tears shot to her eyes and blurred her vision.

Petra cried out. It was a short cry of shock and sudden pain. She saw the small, ruffled figure, the gleam in the bird eyes, the bared old crooked teeth.

Petra raised her fist and pushed, hard, into those teeth. Mademoiselle fell backwards, over her desk, over the sharp edge of the tin box. She gave a little squeal and was quiet.

The delegation fled from the office.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE JANUARY WIND, though not strong, was steady and cold. It came from the mountains and carried with it the bitterness of the iced pines. It jabbed through the holes and the tears in the old tarpaulin which somebody had mercifully suspended from the top of the scaffolding.

Karel took off his gloves and blew in his hands. He grinned. Poor, sensitive doctor's hands—red and stiff now, and his arms ached. He leaned forward and scrutinized the last row of bricks he had laid. Most of the bricks were salvaged from the fire; they were chipped and smoke-blackened, and it was hard to fit them evenly. The Martinice church bells sounded forlornly through the thin air, and from the other end of the scaffolding a rusty tenor voice was singing:

Ah, my poor wife between her sheets this morning,
Her I am scorning,
This Sunday morning,
For my . . . God-damned . . . brigade — *ta-tah-ta-TAH!*

On furnace hall Number Two, not as badly burned as the one on which Karel was working, they were hammering down the tarboard for the roof, and the nails being driven into the wooden beams supplied the rhythm for the singer. Karel put his gloves back on and picked up another brick. Few were left in the hod next to him.

He felt the slight trembling of the scaffold boards under his feet. Someone was coming up the ladder. The two handles of a hod appeared first, then Kravat's long, dusty face, then the whole man, straining under his load. Kravat eased the hod down on the scaffolding and looked on as Karel shoved the next brick in place.

"Let me show you," he said.

He took Karel's trowel, dipped it into the mortar, with two strokes smoothed the oozing matter, and dropped the brick precisely where it belonged.

"Slap — slap — one two!" he said. "Just like that."

Karel stuck his hands into the pockets of his old American Army jacket, by now completely in tatters, and told him, "I'll let you cut out my next set of tonsils, slap — slap — one two, just like that."

"Having fun?" asked Kravat.

"Moderately. I'd hate to do it all week long."

"So do the building workers," Kravat assured him. "They have some old superstition against building in winter."

"But they are working here, during the week!" Karel pointed at the other furnace hall resurrected but for its windows and roof. "That didn't grow by itself, did it?"

Kravat smiled. "It took some tall convincing. I asked them whether they wanted the Rodnik glassworkers to show them how you can build in the winter, and they challenged us, and — "

. . . This Sunday morning,
For my . . . God-damned . . . brigade . . .

the tenor sounded off.

"This Sunday, and next Sunday, and last Sunday, hallelujah," said Kravat. His hands had been busy throughout the patter; now they rested. "What made you come here, Karel?"

"Oh — I don't know. . . ."

"Your brothers wouldn't do it!"

Karel reached for the trowel. "You're wrong there, Kravat, certainly about Joseph. If he'd only thought of it, he would be here and show you a thing or two — he's got the hands for it. After all, he did go into the furnace — remember?"

"I remember Blaha. . . ." Kravat picked up the empty hod. "Joseph must be slipping. Or maybe he's afraid — "

"Of what?"

"Let's say — of falling off the scaffold."

Karel squeezed down the next brick and neatly flicked off the surplus mortar. "You mean somebody might make a board slide off where he was stepping?"

"I didn't say anyone might," Kravat said sharply. "I said he'd be afraid of it."

"Not Joseph!" scoffed Karel. "Give him credit for what he has — and he has got guts. Besides, I think he feels safer now than ever."

"After what happened at the meeting?"

"Just after what happened at the meeting," Karel said matter-of-factly. "He was threatened and reviled, and as long as the men know that apologies are due him, he's got the advantage."

"You gave him the advantage, Karel."

"I kept the lid on the kettle. Did you want violence?"

"No," said Kravat, and moved off. "I'll get you another load of bricks."

Karel watched him climb nimbly down the ladder. Then he worked on silently. Why had he come? Brigade! Volunteer! Contribute your labor! There was a certain exhilaration in joining with hundreds of others for this kind of thing; but after some hours spent hugging a cold wall on a scaffold in Martinice, the exhilaration became largely theoretical. And he really should be in Rodnik. There were cases waiting for him that would crowd him tomorrow.

No, he didn't enjoy this at all. Nobody had asked him to volunteer. He had come on his own because, on his own, he had got up on the stage in the auditorium and had changed the course of events. And however sound his political and ethical and personal reasons had been that night, the effect was that he had anchored Joseph more firmly in the job which his brother was obviously unfit to hold.

Karel slapped down the mortar viciously. *On his own* — that was the catch. If you wanted to be on your own, you had to stay out of matters collective; but if you wanted to participate, you had to be part of a group. It wasn't enough to be a man of good will, trying to be helpful, seeing the difference between right and wrong, and doing what you believed was right. Not in these times.

Kravat dumped another hodful of bricks at his feet. "Come on, Karel, take a break. We've got a fire going."

Karel followed Kravat down the shaky ladder. At a corner of the furnace hall, protected from the wind, someone had set up an old oil drum, punched holes into its sides, and fueled it with fragments of charred beams. About a dozen men huddled around the improvised stove, holding out their hands, and keeping their faces turned from the smoke. They made room for him and offered him an overturned bucket to sit on.

"We're warming up in shifts," mentioned Kravat. "It's the best way to make the work go steady."

Karel lit his pipe. The glow from the oil barrel began to bake him, the numbness slowly left his feet and hands, and he became conscious of some sort of closeness to the men who had welcomed him to the fire and were sharing it with him.

"You know, Doctor," said Viteslav Czerny, the team master, "you're all

right. It isn't every studied man who'd come out on a Sunday like this and do the dirty work we have to do."

"Never mind," Karel refused the flattery, "never mind."

The worker Blatnik rubbed his unshaven, bluish jowls. "If it weren't for certain people, you wouldn't have to be here, Doctor, and I wouldn't and nobody would. Freezing off our asses because —"

"Are you still harping that old tune?" said an elderly man with a reedy voice. "And with the doctor around who added it up for you at the meeting! It's our own fault, everybody's fault — isn't that what you said, Doctor?"

"Or something like it. . . ." Karel packed down the tobacco in the bowl of his pipe. "Of course I didn't mean —"

"What didn't you mean?" asked Blatnik.

Karel wasn't so sure that he wanted to explain to these men how he could have been both right and wrong at the same time. The expression in Kravat's eyes bordered on the sarcastic. Karel angrily spat out a piece of tobacco that had worked its way through the stem. "Don't stand there so smug, Kravat! If you hadn't let the meeting get out of hand —"

"You're absolutely correct. And I've been kicking myself ever since. If I hadn't allowed fellows like Blatnik here to run wild —"

"I'll say what I damn please," grumbled Blatnik.

"To run wild," Kravat repeated, with emphasis, "I think your brother Joseph would have resigned."

"Is that what you wanted?"

Kravat shrugged. "I won't speak for myself. You might think I'm being personal. But I'll ask all these men here: Who's got confidence in Joseph Benda?"

Only three hands rose from the dozen or so men.

Master Czerny said mildly, "As far as I'm concerned, let him have any other big position in any other big glassworks — but not at Benda nor at Hammer."

"Because of the fire?" asked Karel.

No one answered. Finally, Master Czerny cleared his throat. "I don't know if you'll understand us, Doctor. We didn't understand it ourselves. We only got to thinking about it over the last year, and the fire made us see it. If we're supposed to own the Benda Works and this rubble we're sitting on, then one of our kind ought to run them — not somebody who was born to order us around."

Karel hesitated. He was staking his right to sit with them before the old oil drum — and much more than that. Then he stated flatly, "I was born in the same bed my brother Joseph was born in."

"You're different!" Blatnik laughed. "The way you read us the riot act at that meeting — do you suppose anyone else could have gotten away with that?"

Karel stared at the yellow spots of flame that showed where the holes had been punched into the barrel. Their confidences were taking a personal turn, and he didn't like it. "It was pure chance," he said harshly, "that my brother Joseph was born the oldest, and that I became a doctor."

"Mr. Joseph Benda isn't so bad," said the reedy voice. "Now your father, Mr. Peter Benda — there was a man who could make it tough on you!"

"I know what it is," said Czerny, throwing the end of his muffler around his neck. "You see, Doctor, you don't go around thinking you're better than we are; your brother Joseph does, even though he can turn out a fine piece of hollow glassware, as I can testify myself. That's what makes the difference."

Karel smiled involuntarily. He realized that they had to put their feelings in personal terms. It was their way of opening up to him the door to their community.

"Yes, sir!" said Blatnik. "Give the doctor another couple of Sundays laying bricks, and he'll be like us."

"Who wants to be like you, Blatnik!" said Kravat. "Enough gabbing! Back to work, now!" He whistled shrilly for the next group to come down to the fire and walked Karel back to the ladder.

Karel set his foot on the lowest rung, and stopped. "Kravat!"

"Yes?"

"This work isn't too bad! . . ."

"It's healthy."

Karel climbed up two rungs, and halted once more, crooking his elbow around the sidepiece. Kravat was still standing below him.

"Kravat — I think Joseph ought to resign."

"We can't force him."

"Why can't you?"

"We muffed our chance — you and I, both."

Clumsily, Karel mounted the ladder and balanced back to his working place. Slap — slap — one two, he began. The work went faster, now, perhaps because he was rested, or because he was getting the hang of it. The hod was soon empty.

"Bricks!" he yelled.

"Coming!" It was Kravat again. He set down his full hod and nodded at the wall and said, "It's growing!"

Karel didn't pause in his routine. "There are other ways of getting him to resign," he said.

"For instance?"

"Go to your union headquarters in Prague! I suggested that at the meeting. Or go to your Party!"

The lines on Kravat's forehead curved higher. "I was in Prague, you know — before the fire. I saw Novak."

"Oh. And what did he tell you?"

"He asked me three questions. Did I know how powerful Joseph's Party was? Did I have any concrete proof against Joseph? Did I think our trouble was worth a political crisis? That's how things are in Prague."

Karel placed brick to brick. His hands functioned mechanically. Start the new row so that the brick on top centers over the space between the two bricks underneath. Build solidly. We're building for a long time ahead.

"You're right," he said finally, "it will have to be done from here. Couldn't you threaten a strike?"

"A strike against whom? Against ourselves? We own the furnaces. We need the glass."

"Shall I talk to Joseph? Tonight, perhaps? He's usually home in Rodnik over the week end. . . ."

"You can try, Karel," Kravat said tolerantly, "if it makes you feel better."

On the Benda Works truck, which shuttled the brigade back to Rodnik, Karel became apprehensive. Despite the dirt on him and his fatigue, his nerves were keyed up and he was short-tempered with the men who were jammed in with him. Actually, now that he was somehow one of them and preparing himself to be their ambassador, he felt quite apart from them. For a while, he almost hoped that his landlady would receive him with a report of one or several telephone calls which would force him to pick up his little black bag and run out doctoring.

There was nothing of the sort when he got home; nobody had come down with the mumps or a broken ankle. What during the day, at work, in the company of the men, had appeared as easy and natural — just walk in to Joseph and tell him! — now came to look unreal and impossible. And what would it net? Some barbed remarks from Joseph on where he could go to peddle his recommendations?

But Joseph received him with sincere cordiality.

"I wish you had come earlier!" he said. "You could have had dinner with us!" He called Lida. "Tell the maid to fix up a plate for Karel! It was a damned good meal — there must be something left of it —"

He led Karel into the sitting room. If Lida was suspicious, she didn't show it. Karel felt his misgivings recede. A dish of roast beef and potatoes and gravy on his lap, he ate and watched a large, comfortable slipper half-

dangle from Joseph's foot. The room was cozy and well-lit; Joseph, wearing a dark green house jacket with a velvet collar, puffed away at a cigarette, ease and contentment in every gesture. The food and the warm air, after the day's exertion, made Karel drowsy. He couldn't even rouse himself to his usual frown over Lida's arrangement of the furniture.

Joseph was telling him of Petra — how much she liked the Declerques Institute where he had placed her, and what a hit she had made with Minister Dolezhal, who was childless and had practically adopted her. Intentionally or not, Joseph was weaving a cloak of family sentiment which spread over Karel until his mind was hardly able to move.

"I'm so much happier," Joseph was saying, "now that you've gotten over — well, what you've gotten over. It's given me back a little faith in people."

Karel folded his napkin and handed his plate and fork and knife to Lida. Before she set them aside, she gazed at him probingly and said, "Joseph told me you saved his life. Or at least a considerable amount of his blood. I want to thank you."

"Oh yes!" Joseph's slipper was swinging violently. "The way he told off that rabble! It was the biggest surprise of my life." He rested his head on the back of his chair. "But I always knew it. Karel, I knew that once they went too far you'd see what kind of people you were fraternizing with. Well — let's drop it, shall we? What have you been doing with yourself? Today, for instance?"

"Today, for instance — " Karel was sensitive to Lida's watchful waiting. He was sure, now, that she didn't set half as much store in his change of heart as Joseph did. It made it no easier to stick the needle under his brother's skin. "Today I went out on brigade."

"Brigade?"

"To rebuild the furnace halls at the Hammer Works."

"Really?" Joseph slapped his knee. "Wonderful! What did you work at?"

"Bricklaying."

"You should have called me, Karel!" He seemed to find the picture of Karel pasting a brick wall together a capital joke. "We could have driven over in my car and I could have laid bricks, too. Something very constructive about that! Seriously speaking — we can't leave these brigades, and all these new gimmicks that catch the imagination of the public, to the Communists! Next time I'm here, and they have a brigade, will you let me know?"

"I will. . . ." Karel ran his hand through his hair. From being the confidant of the men he was now promoted to being Joseph's ally. He would have to put a stop to it before he was unable to extricate himself.

"Joseph, I came here because — "

"You *had* a special reason?" asked Lida.

"Yes."

"Well, come on out with it!" Joseph said jovially.

"I came to suggest that you resign as National Administrator."

The slipper hung perfectly still.

"Because it's better for you, Joseph, and better for the Works and for the men."

"Is that so!" There was no longer any give to Joseph's face; it was tight as a drum.

"They have no confidence in you."

"Who hasn't?"

"The men."

The tightness broke. "Who the hell cares whether or not they have confidence in me — as long as the Government has, and my Party has, and I have! You talked differently at the meeting! Who's put you up to this? Who's sent you here? The Communists?!"

"I've come on my own."

"On your own . . . ?" said Lida.

"Yes, quite on my own!" Karel said sharply.

"I believe you!" The memory of the meeting, of Karel's defense plea, was still strong enough to make Joseph want to reason with him. "I believe you." He sighed. "At least you *think* you've come on your own. My dear Karel" — he had regained complete composure and was acting the older brother — "I had hoped that you'd finally worked your way free of them. They're very clever. They make you think you're acting on your own while, in truth, you're only fronting for them. They want to get rid of me, they tried it at the meeting, they didn't succeed because you stopped them, so now they're pushing you forward as their camouflage and their tool."

"Tool?" said Karel. Joseph was attributing his goulash soup tactics to the others. "I don't believe I'm a tool."

"You aren't?" Joseph rose and stood before him, accusingly. "You've pulled their chestnuts out of the fire ever since you discovered that Blaha had Grinder's Hand."

For a moment Karel was doubtful. Joseph had brought up a point which he himself had considered often enough. But then he wiped all that off the board. What nonsense to demand that you should stand up only for an original idea of your own, separate, securely patented, and copyrighted! If something was just and right, it was just and right even if the Communists told you so — and they hadn't told him.

"I'd hate to have to be around, Joseph," he said, "when you have no alternative, when the time comes that you must resign. It would be so

much more gracious to do it now, and it would leave you with a lot more sympathy."

Joseph's feet were icy, despite the warm slippers. And if there was some force to back up Karel's warning? The very fact that Karel was proving himself to be a tool and a puppet, pushed forward by them to hide their own hand, made the hand evidence itself all the more clearly. *You will not resign*, Dolezhal had said, *not under any circumstances!* Resign — and give up his toehold in his Works, and give up Vesely's? They'd have to beat him to death, first, as they might have done in the auditorium, after the fire.

He smiled down at Karel. "Even if I wanted to — and I don't want to — I couldn't resign."

There was a pause.

Then Lida said, "At that meeting, Karel — you didn't really want to stop the men at all?"

"I think I'd better go," said Karel.

Outside on the street, looking back at the one lighted window in the double-winged mausoleum that was his father's house, he felt a sudden chill. Even the time for meaning well was past.

CHAPTER SIX

Rarely has a man who found the conditions surrounding him to his liking produced works which outlasted his own generation. Opposition is the thread that runs through most of the inspired philosophy and art conceived since the invention of the printing press. Scan their words, and you will find that even those who seemed to fit themselves smoothly into their society, who uttered no open protest, offer up strong indications of dissatisfaction and surreptitious kicking over of the traces.

Such steady repetition of the same pattern permits the statement of a rule: That opposition, criticism, revolt are like the leaven in the dough without which the bread would turn out flat and tasteless. Prometheus, rising up against the power of the Gods, is the prototype of the creative person.

Conversely. That when opposition, criticism, and revolt are forbidden and become unnecessary, the creative stimulus is choked or falls dormant. Since opposition cannot be legislated out of existence, since no church, no thought police ever succeeded in extinguishing the little, irksome flame that keeps the kettle of unruliness boiling, we need not be too concerned, historically speaking, with the ultimate effects of what the Germans call *Verboten!*

But what if man should finally establish a form of society so rich, so equitable, so all-providing that opposition to it would have no purpose, would become foolish? The earth is so abundant! Our technical knowledge has made such strides! We need nothing more than the application of some horse sense, some organization, some work, and the elimination of those who want to monopolize that wealth and that knowledge for themselves — and the millennium is ours.

And what a millennium! We'll all be fat and outwardly happy; yet I'm afraid that anyone with an ounce of independent brain will be bored to death. . . .

From THOMAS BENDA: *Essay on Freedom*

THOMAS had chosen the small, dull Aurora hotel in the Vinohrady section because it was cheaper, because he could pass unnoticed there, and because he didn't want to run into Joseph at the Esplanade. Against these advantages were set the abominable service and the mustiness of dilapidation which seeped out of the rugs at every step and permeated the hotel and every room in it.

The elevator wouldn't come, as usual. Impatient, Thomas decided to walk down the three flights to the lobby. The stair-well windows, greasy from the kitchen steam, opened on an enclosed courtyard in which the gray light of the morning was dimmed to nondescript dusk — no pleasant outlook on a day in which such pleasant things as publication dates and jacket designs and delivery of galley proofs were to be discussed! Ah, well — if Barsiny could swallow the *Essay*, what were a few ramshackle stairs?

Barsiny hadn't committed himself in his suave invitation to this morning's conference; the railroad tickets, second class, had been enclosed. One couldn't very well demand that a comprehensive opinion on so knotty a book as the *Essay* should be given in a publisher's business letter. Barsiny might have his secret misgivings, he might even come out with them — but he would have to acknowledge the sweep and richness and novelty of ideas, and the quality of the writing — and, Thomas smiled, a contract was still a contract!

"Mr. Benda!" The desk clerk, automatically reaching for Thomas's key, smirked. "Lady waiting for you!"

"Thanks," Thomas nodded, and thought angrily: Kitty — she's come after me. But Kitty was nowhere to be seen. A strange girl, reading a newspaper, sat under a faded picture of President Masaryk riding his horse.

"Yes — that's her!" said the clerk. "She came just a minute ago. I sent the elevator boy up to tell you —"

"Must have missed me," Thomas said offhandedly. "I walked down."

He frowned. Barsiny would have phoned if he wanted to postpone the appointment — so she was not a messenger from Humanita. But who else knew that he was in Prague and where he was staying?

"She sure was eager to get together with you!" As Thomas did not reply but kept looking at the girl, the clerk withdrew his hand and grimaced. Tight, those bastards from the provinces.

The girl was not conscious, yet, that she was being observed. Thomas saw her dark, severe hairline, the long lashes shading her eyes and hiding their color, the outline of her small breasts under her simple blouse, the heart-shaped silver locket dangling between them.

She was probably a reporter who had found out from Humanita that he was in town and at the Aurora. A reporter from one of those literary magazines, getting a pittance per line and trying to squeeze a short interview out of him so as to make some pocket money. He knew the type. They were gushy and full of open-mouthed adulation; they managed to have their knees brush against yours, and you practically had to write their story for them.

All right, he felt good today — he didn't mind giving her a break; but it would have to be later. He slipped the clerk a small bill. "Tell her I've gone out. I'll be back sometime after lunch. Tell her to call me for an appointment."

"Very well, Mr. Benda," said the clerk.

When Thomas turned to go, the girl was no longer in her seat. She caught up with him at the door.

"You're Mr. Thomas Benda?" she asked, her tone urgent.

"Yes," he said, "But —"

"My name is Vlasta Rehan." She extended her hand, and he felt it in his, warm and confident.

"You catch me at a bad moment. I'm afraid —" He stopped, startled by the intense gray of her eyes, the slate gray of a mountain lake after the rains. Then he fought the impression, and said, "I have to go to a conference."

"I'll wait. May I wait here for you?"

She was too tense for a reporter, even one writing for a literary gazette. Maybe she was a young actress and figured that he had a play up his sleeve. It wasn't such a bad idea at that. He could do it in three months' time. First act they meet. Second act they're torn apart. Third act they get together again. Curtain. It might be a lot of fun after the Essay.

"What do you want, Miss Rehan? Who are you?"

"I'm a teacher," she said apologetically. "To be exact, an instructor at the Declerques Institute."

"Yes? And?"

The name apparently meant nothing to him. "I'm one of Petra's tutors — your niece Petra —"

"The Declerques Institute — of course. Forgive me. I did want to call on Petra — how is she? — but I arrived only last night — and this morning I'm in a rush, as you can see . . ."

"It's about Petra!"

The urgency in her voice made him hesitate. He looked at his watch. He'd have eight minutes to get down to Humanita; he'd have to take a taxi; and God only knew if he would find one in this neighborhood.

"Now listen, Miss Rehan — don't you know that Petra's father is right here in Prague, most of the week? He lives at the Esplanade, and I'm sure he'll be only too glad —"

"I know about Deputy Benda," she said soberly.

Some schoolgirl trouble, he thought, that had to be kept from Joseph. Money, in all likelihood. They probably reined these kids in. He sighed. "Come back in an hour or two, and wait for me. Good-by, now!"

He didn't hear her thank him. He found a taxi at the corner. Sitting gingerly on the broken springs of the rear seat, he had a fleeting notion that it might be nice to have a glass of wine with this Vlasta Rehan, in celebration of a dignified and attractive jacket design.

"My dear Mr. Benda!"

The publisher's welcome was hearty enough, and his handshake was given with a fervor designed to make Thomas feel at home and comfortable. Yet, something in the overlaid voice made Thomas wary, much as he wanted to sit back and enjoy Barsiny's compliments and listen to the publishing plans for his book.

Dr. Egon Barsiny lounged against his desk. It was his way of establishing an atmosphere of ease.

"I've read your essay twice, and I must say that the second time it impressed me even more. I discovered new beauties, new depths of thought, new and original ideas that, on first reading, I had not fully appreciated. You can be congratulated, and my associates agree with me in their evaluation of the book."

Thomas smiled.

The months of study, the concepts set down and torn up, the ideas formed and remolded, the excruciating struggle with himself, the drive toward utter probity, to the point of self-destruction — they had paid off. The work was done, and recognized. The Spokesman had spoken, the voice would be heard, and his contribution to the body of thought of his people and his times would reach its audience.

"It took me two years," he said. "A little over two years, I think. The

most difficult years of my life, Dr. Barsiny, I daresay, even including my years in exile."

The publisher nodded understandingly.

"So you'll forgive me, I hope," Thomas went on, "if I'm in somewhat of a hurry now. We're in the second week of January — I know there's the question of paper and the problem with the printing shops — but this is a small book compared to the big potboilers you publish. . . . Can you have it out this spring, say by the end of March or beginning of April?"

Christ in Heaven! thought Barsiny. Hatching a little egg like that for over two years! If Benda had come with it a year ago, six months ago . . . Time rolls on, and the weather changes; the man should have enough sense to see what's up, without my having to tell him. . . .

Thomas said, "Well, if spring is impossible — summer's not such a good time — the early fall, then?"

Even if Dolezhal makes a personal issue of it, Barsiny calculated, he can't force me. Dolezhal isn't sitting so pretty, any more. I've got a publishing house to look after, and I want Humanita to go on whether Dolezhal is in the Cabinet or not. There's money involved, millions — he can't make me risk it for that boy's pipe dreams!

"Dr. Barsiny!"

"My dear Mr. Benda — this is as hard for me as it must be for you . . . We cannot publish the Essay."

Thomas did not move. He simply did not believe it.

Barsiny spoke very fast. "I'd like to publish it, God is my witness, Mr. Benda. But there are considerations — you must have noticed that the political picture has changed quite a bit since we saw each other last and signed the contract. Oh, we'll make some arrangement, don't worry about that. Your advance, of course, is yours, and I've talked to my associates about a substantial sum over and above that, which we'll be happy to pay you. And the rights revert to you —"

"Dr. Barsiny! Why?"

The publisher suppressed a sigh. He had hoped that all he had been saying would have blunted the shock. Authors are too damned sensitive and unrealistic. "You want me to be completely frank? Brutally frank?"

He saw Thomas get out of the big chair and try to stand. Thomas was shaky. A book is a book, thought Barsiny. He can write another one. And he'll find someone who can afford to risk printing his "Essay on Freedom." Why should I be the fall guy? He's a writer and can treat himself to the luxury of being uncompromising; I've got a big business to worry about.

"I wish you would be frank, Dr. Barsiny. For two years of back-breaking work, I deserve at least that."

Poor fellow! Yet, he took it quite well, considering. . . .

"Your book, Mr. Benda, exciting as it is from a purely philosophical viewpoint, is no good for us. That does not mean that other publishers won't take it. They'll grab it up, if they have any sense —"

"Why is it no good for you?"

"Because it offends everybody, subverts everything, and fits in none of the known grooves."

"But that is Freedom!"

Barsiny scratched his short-cropped, yellow skull. "Yes — I know!"

"That's what the book was supposed to be about!"

Thomas was fighting, now — no longer for the publication, but for the idea of his book. "What kind of Freedom is it when a man cannot speak without fitting himself into known grooves!"

"My dear Mr. Benda —"

"Don't *my dear* me! I can't stand it!"

"I can give it to you any old way!" Barsiny grew hard. "When you wrote that advance statement on your essay, before the 1946 elections, you fitted yourself into a groove — Dolezhal's. If your book had been like your statement, I could have defended publication — after all, we're financed by his Party."

Thomas winced. He had known it all along, or most of it; but now it came like a blow below the belt. Dolezhal's stooge, a paid stooge — that's what he had been. He had no right to complain, to hand a mouthful of big words about Freedom to Barsiny, that hack . . .

"Even so," Barsiny continued, "publication would have been dangerous. As your book stands, you're attacking not only our principles, whatever they may be, but the Communists', too! Don't you know what's going on? I don't want to be nationalized like your brother. I want to keep what I have, and I'm not going to provoke them."

"I wouldn't expect you to," said Thomas. "May I have my manuscript?"

Barsiny rang a bell, and his secretary showed her pretty face at the door.

"The 'Essay on Freedom,'" ordered Barsiny.

The "Essay on Freedom" — what a travesty!

Then Barsiny, with a regretful sigh, handed Thomas the volume. Its hard cover weighed in Thomas's hands, and its solidity gave him enough strength to make a quiet, brave exit.

If he walked slowly, it would take him a good half-hour to get back to the Aurora. Of course, he could just trudge through the streets and let himself get lost; but that would have been unbearable. He had to have some point of destination.

He walked with his head to the ground, the fan-shaped mosaic pavement of the Prague sidewalks hazy beneath his eyes. People pushed him; he didn't notice them. Streetcar bells clanged and the silent trolley-buses glided by, bicycles shrilled their warning and the hot-sausage vendors hawked, "*Parky! Horké parky!*" Snow-laden clouds drooped around the towers, and the wind drove hasty eddies of sharp dust around his ankles.

He was outside of this, outside of everything. He did not fit in, and so he had been spewed out like the phlegm in the gutters. The era of freedom, the era when he could stand above the groupings and say his say without regard to their milling and moving, was closed. He was thirty-four years old and already an anachronism.

Another publisher!

He laughed out loud, and people eyed him, shrugged, and went on.

The commercial houses would have the same holy fear of the truth as Barsiny; for the Catholics, he didn't have enough unction and dogma, for the Right he was too left, and for the Left, too right. There was not even a human being to whom he could turn, except Kitty whose helpfulness would drive him screaming. Joseph would tell him to cut out everything that smacked of the faintest approval of socialist measures; and Karel would try to insist that freedom and paternalism could very well co-exist, and that under the new setup everybody would be his own father. And Stanek would have to condemn the Essay—his friends would tell him to.

He was caught hanging in the nowhere, his feet treading on air, his hands clutching emptiness, and his head in an atmosphere so rarefied that he was gasping for breath. He had wanted to be objective, to find that station suspended by no ropes from no place, from which, the philosopher had said, one might lift the world out of its hinges; and the world had turned its back on him.

What to do now with all his uselessness? Find another Elinor Simpson with skirts to hang on to? Rewrite the Essay to please any of a half-dozen groups he might pick by counting the buttons on his vest? Or die and leave it to posterity to discover that here, in the Year of the Lord 1948, lived a man not tied by temporal chains?

He came into the drab lobby of his hotel. The smell, the dusty furniture, the spotted marble of the clerk's counter merged depressively and intensified his weariness. He longed to get to his room, to throw himself on his bed, shoes and all, and try to sleep. He would sleep, even without pills; a great exhaustion filled him as if he had been bled.

"Oh, Mr. Benda!"

For a moment, he stared at her uncomprehendingly. Then the clouds on his mind began to shift, and her face and features, her polite and yet

urgent manner began to recall some duty postponed, some concession pushed off for later. He groaned inwardly.

He thought he saw her gaze at the large envelope under his arm. "That's my new book," he parried the question he felt coming. "And I'm not going to tell you about it."

"Please," she said, "please. . . ." Her voice was like a cooling hand. "I'll come back. Tonight."

"No, no, no!" he refused. "I've made you wait long enough."

"It wasn't so long. And you look as if you need some rest."

It wasn't so long. How long? An hour and a half, perhaps. It takes you two years to write out your soul, and a few minutes to have it thrown back at you.

The name had finally filtered back into his mind. "Miss Rehan," he told her, "it doesn't matter. I've got nothing else to do today, or tomorrow, or the day after. I might as well listen to you, now."

She shook her head gently, seriously.

"I insist!" he said. "I had a little setback, I admit; but it's nothing. These things happen every day, if not to me, then to somebody else."

"Oh yes," she smiled, "I know how that is. And the body makes its demands. I've slept for days on end myself, at such times."

"You have?" he said gratefully.

"I'll be back about seven. If you're up, fine. If not, I'll check later."

"Thank you," he said, and watched her go. How young she was, and how strong, and how knowing! But when she had disappeared through the revolving door, he forgot her again and stood alone, feeling as if every muscle had been stretched beyond endurance and been left unable to contract, like a tired rubber band.

Several times during the afternoon he was awakened by his own chuckles. He had delightful dreams, a sequence of hilarious jokes whose points escaped him in the short intervals of consciousness, so that he wanted to fall back to sleep to recapture his mirth.

The room was pitch-dark and the air close when, with a start, he came fully awake. It was already eight o'clock. The girl had probably been here and gone again. Too bad. A layer of giddiness had grown in him like plaster that closed up the crags of his defeat. He shaved, and washed his face and hands and chest, and combed his hair, and looked at himself. The hell with Barsiny! The hell with a generation that had no use for him! The greatest minds in history had been laughed at and misunderstood and rejected during their lifetime, only to be celebrated afterwards. Of course, the belated glory meant nothing to you, molding in your grave; but it was a thought to be carried around with you like a concealed weapon. So he went downstairs.

And there she was, coming toward him, greeting him.

"Shall we have dinner together, Miss Rehan?" he asked, almost cheerfully.

"I've had my dinner, thank you."

She was obviously lying. She looked undernourished. Her clothes were painfully neat, but worn. She was proud — pale, proper, and proud.

"Well," he said, "I have to have something. Perhaps you'll sit with me, and change your mind." He guided her into the dining room. "How's the cuisine at Mademoiselle Declerques's?"

Vlasta looked glum.

"I thought so," he said, holding her chair for her. "And I think that it isn't good for Petra to be jailed there. That kind of boarding school is just one step above a reformatory — or am I hurting your feelings, Miss Rehan?"

He studied her. She was more than pale, proper, and proud — she was beautiful, with a virginal beauty. Her narrow, spirited face framed in black, her chaste lips, her slender, aquiline nose, were a piquant temptation; as a young leaf tempted you to open it, so did her stern lines challenge you to remold them into a smile.

"No," she said, "my feelings are not involved at all. And the Institute is a jail, especially for Petra."

"Is that what you've come to see me about?"

"Yes."

"Petra's not happy there?"

"She's been incarcerated."

"But that's medieval!"

"So is the whole Institute!"

"Does my brother know?"

She spun one of the green and white cardboard coasters that advertised Pilsen beer. "I doubt it. But if he does, his information comes from Mademoiselle, and it won't be the truth."

He watched the play of her fingers, long, slender fingers, exciting, with oval-shaped nails. "Please, won't you have something?" he asked, as the waiter came for the order.

She agreed to take some soup and bread, items which were easy on his limited supply of ration stamps. And, yes, some wine. Thomas ordered brandy for himself.

Sniffing the bouquet of the brandy in the fist-sized glass, he asked, "What really happened? Tell me all of it, please." He gulped the brandy and waved to the waiter.

More brandy, and more of the voice of the girl — and the memory of the Essay, pain and frustration, would grow duller and duller. Vlasta's

precise, even sentences pleased his ear. She was intelligent, with the clear, analytical reasoning of an intellectual. She was free of the sentiment with which Kitty muddled every situation; neither did she employ Lida's disagreeable, self-centered sharpness which, in the end, negated all decent human impulse. Above all, she knew none of Elinor's steamroller tactics which stamped under every dissenting concept.

With a third brandy warming his stomach, the humor of his dreams crept back into his mood, and he began to evolve plots to hamstring Mademoiselle's vengeance, to liberate Petra, to *do* something. That's what had been his weakness, that's what was at the bottom of his failure with the Essay — he had thought instead of acted, theorized instead of lived. The world of thought could not be divorced from life; theory was a derivative of practice; a good brawl was a lot more useful than a high-level debate.

"I like Petra very much," she was saying. "I didn't know what to do. Mademoiselle was quite inaccessible and quite unreasonable, and her mouth was bleeding from the tooth she had lost. But I knew from Petra that your wife had written you might come to Prague —"

His eyes narrowed momentarily. The reference to Kitty threatened to topple the latticework propping up his spirit.

"Another brandy!" he called, and laughed without reason. "And what drink for you, Vlasta — may I call you Vlasta?"

"I still have my wine. Anyway, to conclude, I got in touch with the office of your publishers and came here and waited for you."

"That was very sensible of you, Vlasta. Don't look at my glass. Brandy sharpens my thinking, you know. Now, what do you feel we should do?"

He settled back in his chair and let the age-streaked red curtains at the windows, the badly washed tablecloth, the wallpaper peeling off at the corners of the ceiling, penetrate his senses. He found with great satisfaction that none of these affected him.

"You will talk to your brother, the Deputy," she suggested, "and tell him to get Petra out?"

"I will do no such thing," he answered gravely. "If you wanted to let him know, why didn't you go to him yourself?"

"He's a busy man —" she groped, "a politician — I am nobody. . . ."

"Have you ever met him?"

"Once, when he visited the Institute."

"I see," he chortled. "So you do know him! And you know that he would find it most obnoxious that his own daughter proposed to lead a strike, and that he would support any punishment Mademoiselle Declerques saw fit to administer."

Her half-smile told him how well they understood one another.

"We'll have to organize a *coup de main*," he went on, laugh lines around his deep-set eyes, "be very anarchistic, use some force and violence, and kidnap the Deputy's daughter. It'll be sensational! Can't you just see Mademoiselle and your Count Arkadij Tolstoy and all the other gnomes scurry about, after their prisoner is gone?"

He was beaming. He didn't care what she thought of the plan — she or anybody else. *He* was planning it! Always, other people had done the planning, and he had been assimilated into the plans. Any time he had wanted to do something important, he'd had to do it undercover. Not this time!

"I can see them," she confirmed. "I can also see myself out of a job."

"Very well stated!" he said. "The voice of reason! You think I've gone through some emotional crisis or other, and you think I'm off my balance, now — I assure you, I am not. I'll give you reason for reason. What's the good of my brother being a Deputy if he can't get you another, better job?"

"But you yourself told me he would support Mademoiselle!"

"Leave it to me!" he said, his tongue heavy. "Vlasta Rehan, there is a secret bond between my brother Joseph and myself — Benda blood, solid stuff! He always comes to me when his soul is troubled — always. So this once I'll come to him for help — for you, Vlasta Rehan."

He swayed and hinged his hands on the edge of the table. He saw her get up.

"Where are you going?"

"Home — to the Institute."

"Not yet, please —"

"I must. It's late. And you're tired again."

"But the plan! We haven't discussed the plan at all."

"You're not serious about it?"

He rose unsteadily. "Never was so serious in my life. What else is there to do?"

She had no answer.

"You see?"

She walked ahead of him, out of the dining room.

"Let me get you a cab!" he said. "You were disappointed in me. You're wrong. When will I meet you again?"

She looked at him with maddening abstraction. Her eyes had a velvety sheen, he noticed, and his mouth went dry.

"I suppose," she said, "tomorrow, when you're sober."

"Tomorrow," he said; and after he had tipped the clerk to get a cab and had put her into it, he kept mumbling, "Tomorrow," and laughing to himself about the gnomes at the Institute.

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The next morning, he wired Kitty that he would have to stay in Prague for a few more days. He put his manuscript in his suitcase, and with the snapping of the lock, he determined to give himself a short vacation for living. Then he went to the Declerques Institute and waited on the other side of the street, trying to be unobtrusive, but keeping the door under observation.

The girls came out, on their way to school, a chattering and yet awkwardly repressed crowd of not-quite women, chaperoned by two elderly ladies. After them, a dapper old gentleman emerged, swinging a cane, and walking off as if his joints were rusted. And finally Vlasta, a couple of books under her arm — she saw Thomas, stopped, and the flicker of a smile showed on her lips.

Thomas lifted his hat courteously and joined her. He felt embarrassed, like a schoolboy meeting his first date. "Where are you headed?" he asked.

"To the University."

"May I accompany you?"

"Certainly."

For a while, they walked in silence. She carried herself erect, setting her feet as if her worn, flat-heeled shoes were dancing slippers.

"How's Petra?" he said, almost belligerently.

"I haven't been able to see her." She hid her worry. "The same, I assume, as yesterday."

He chafed under her restraint. "Well — did you think up a better plan than mine?"

"Look, Mr. Benda," she said, avoiding his eyes, "perhaps I was mistaken to bother you. It'll all blow over."

"You don't believe I can deliver on my promises," he said morosely. "That's a premature judgment. I had a few drinks last night. Any other man in my situation would have put a bullet in his head!"

"People don't kill themselves so quickly."

Her voice had grown harsh; she knew what she was talking of. He was glad that she didn't show the least bit of sympathy. He didn't want sympathy. That he had at home.

"You're quite wonderful," he said suddenly. "You're aware of that, aren't you?"

Her steps slowed, and she shifted her books from one arm to the other. He saw her much-darned gloves; he wanted to take them off her hands and kiss her fingers.

"Let's understand one another, Mr. Benda. I am interested in Petra. She's a lonely and imaginative and rebellious adolescent, and what has been done to her at home and what's being done to her now is bad. This par-

ticular incident might blow over; but others are bound to follow. And then? Unless we help her, she'll be warped for life."

"I want to help her, Vlasta," he said humbly. "I want to help you to help her. Last night, you probably thought I wanted the mischief for mischief's sake, or to get even with someone for something." He took her arm and made her hold her stride to his. "Now, let's start all over. What should we do?"

"I have a key to the Declerques Institute." She was thinking aloud. "All instructors have. But only Mademoiselle and the housekeeper have a key to the punishment room. I probably can filch the housekeeper's —"

"Vlasta!" he warned, "that's my scheme!"

"So it is," she said, unruffled.

"You like it, all of a sudden?"

"Matters have changed because you have," she said. "But what will you do with Petra afterwards?"

"Take her to Rodnik, where she belongs."

"And what about her parents?"

"They'll be faced with the *fait accompli*."

They had reached the Moldau River and turned right along the quay, toward Smetana Square. St. Vitus's Cathedral grew out of the mist on the other shore. Very conscious of being with her, he counted the minutes that remained to them.

"I told you," he said — and believed it himself — "I have some influence on my brother. But what will become of you?"

She shrugged. "I can find another job if I have to."

"You won't have to," he grinned boyishly. "I've thought about that, too. I'm going to kidnap the both of you — please, hold your objections! You're Petra's friend, she likes you, she needs someone to like. She needs a tutor for a year or two, to prepare her for the entrance exams to the University. My brother Joseph has a big house, you can live there more comfortably and eat better than at Mademoiselle's. And if you're worried about your own University credits, you can go to Prague every so often and take your tests."

She did not comment.

"Or is there somebody — somebody here in Prague . . . ?" His anxiety was plain. He searched her expressionless face and went on hastily, "There isn't. There should be! My God, Vlasta, you're an exquisite woman!"

"I'm anything but," she said. "And I don't go for flattery."

"I wasn't flattering. Now you've interrupted me. . . . Prague, yes. You might miss the excitement and the stimulation of the big city; but life in Rodnik has its compensations. Vlasta, I need someone like you, someone I

can talk to, someone sane and sound and with a mind of her own. There's nothing more debilitating to a creative person than to have to create in a vacuum, in a valley without echoes, a sea without bottom."

"You are married," she said.

"Yes, I am married," he answered. "What has that got to do with it?"

They were in front of the building of the Philosophical Faculty. She halted to say good-by to him. Her overcoat came open. He saw the silver locket and wondered what might be inside it.

"Petra needs a teacher," he said. "And I need a friend, not a bed companion."

Her thin face was turned to him, her eyes sedate and unpromising. "I agree to tutor Petra in Rodnik. It will be a business arrangement, subject to your brother's approval, and with the understanding that I can leave if it shouldn't work out."

CHAPTER SEVEN

PETRA sat gimlet-eyed.

The phone call to Joseph had gone through hours ago; now they were waiting for his arrival. The letdown had set in, and Karel's living room was nothing to cheer up anyone.

Petra's head kept sinking for a second or two of unconsciousness and then jerking up again.

"You should lie down," said Karel. "Your father is taking the evening train and won't be here until nine."

She made no move to go to his bedroom, and he didn't insist.

Vlasta stopped rocking her empty coffee cup on its saucer and said, "Why don't you stretch out for a while, Petra? You've been on the go since we left the Institute, you didn't sleep last night, you didn't sleep on the train, you've eaten practically nothing, and you're all in."

Thomas thought he should bolster Vlasta's advice. Besides he hoped that Vlasta would pay some attention to him once Petra was out of the room. The few hours of the few days he'd had with Vlasta in Prague had been intensely alive. There had been nothing physical between them — not that he hadn't longed to possess her, to watch her eyes dim in the moment of giving — but he'd felt so close to her, and happy in a way he could not remember ever having experienced. Since Petra's liberation, however, Vlasta had hardly talked to him. The two girls had been reliving the getaway and

life under the Old Crow; their prattling had amused him at first, their affection toward one another had charmed him; after enough of the same thing, though, he had begun to wish Petra's vivacity to hell.

"I think Vlasta and Karel are right," he said magisterially. "And furthermore, if you expect the session with your father to be easy, you're mistaken. You'll need all your wits about you, Petra, and in the state you're in, you couldn't talk sensibly to a cowherd."

Petra shook her head obstinately and said with a simplicity which softened Thomas, "All the people I love in this world are here with me now, and you want me to leave this room and sleep. I haven't seen Uncle Karel for ages; now I want to look at him and hear him talk."

The slate gray in Vlasta's eyes became darker, and she smiled at Thomas as if to say: You see?

Karel said, "I'll still be talking tomorrow, Petra."

Petra was insistent. "The Old Crow even had the lights shut off in the punishment room. I've done nothing but sleep and eat."

"Suit yourself," shrugged Karel. He was in no mood to argue, or to arrange, or to plan ahead. He had opened his home to the three fugitives, because they had no other place to go. He was ready to put up with Joseph, too, because where else could they hold the council? Joseph's house would have meant Lida clamoring implacably for Petra's immediate return to the Institute; and he could understand that Thomas didn't want to bring Vlasta to St. Nepomuk.

Beyond that, his thoughts were muddled, his observations incongruous and disconnected. His impression of Vlasta was blurred. She made him think of a palimpsest under whose surface lettering faint traces were discernible — but whether these were streaks in the parchment or the remains of the original writing was impossible to ascertain. There was something about her of an unrobed nun who, regardless of what she might wear, could not hide her former calling. She was close-mouthed and retiring and opened up only when she spoke to Petra, or talked of Petra, or looked at her. This could be a way of protecting herself — she had been brought to Thomas's home grounds and probably was unsure of herself, of the behavior expected of her, and above all, of her future. She must be aware of the fact that a wife would have to be faced at one time or another; she might be bothered by the whole small-town setup in which even the most innocuous words and gestures and chance meetings set tongues wagging; and there was himself, about whose position and role and attitudes she knew nothing.

Nor could he find a simple denominator for the relationship between her and Thomas. It was obvious that Thomas was taken with her. Thomas would say a few words to her in a diffident voice, and then stop. He would

reach out and recall his hand. He would mention his part in what he called the kidnaping, and suddenly laugh at the silliness of it. He would praise the advantages of Rodnik and reverse himself and belittle everything in the town.

Vlasta let him dangle. Karel would have found her cruel if he had been able to say definitely that her manner was the result of design or of reaction to Thomas's approaches. But for all he could see, there was no reaction, there was no design — she was completely bland, she was irresponsible with such a lack of guile that he couldn't even get annoyed at her.

The one positive feature, Karel thought, was that Petra, despite her protestations, seemed less infatuated with him. But his relief over this was a minor item compared to the turbulence unloosed in him by the entry of Thomas with this oddly beautiful girl. All his feelings for Kitty, controlled by *Thou Shalt Not Covet Thy Brother's Wife*, repressed by denying himself her company, sublimated by hard work, had leaped up like a flame out of ashes. A man can build himself a cage and resign himself and go on for a long while and even be quite happy — until a glimpse into other possibilities buckles and breaks the bars. What if Thomas let go of Kitty? What if the reserved young teacher was the acid that ate through the chain by which Kitty was fettered and by which his own moral code was held in place?

He wished Petra had never seen the inside of the Declerques Institute; he wished that Thomas and Vlasta had never met, or if they had to meet, had never come to his flat. A minute later he wished that his brother would commit adultery so that he might be justified in committing adultery with his brother's wife — only to condemn himself for the wish and be agonized by it.

Vlasta fingered her silver heart uncomfortably. He caught himself. He had been staring at her as if her face or the line of her throat were features on a map and could show him a way. "That's an interesting old locket, Miss Rehan!" he said. "May I see it?" And he stretched out his hand.

The paleness of her cheeks changed by a shade. Her fingers left the medallion, and it glided to its place between her breasts.

"Karel!" said Thomas, "that's Vlasta's affair!"

Karel's hand still lay open on the table; the sleeve of his shirt had slid back, and the white, sinewy lower arm with the blue of the tattooed serial number was exposed.

"Vlasta never shows it to anyone," said Petra. She was jealous of the locket.

For a moment, Vlasta's eyes rested on the tattoo; then she reached up, unclasped the thin chain, and handed the silver heart to Karel.

He knew he should not open it. But there was a compulsion in him —

he had to see the man's picture inside; it would give him the answer, about Vlasta, about Thomas.

He unsnapped the catch, looked — and quickly closed the locket and gave it back.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"It's no secret," said Vlasta, "nothing mysterious, nothing holy." With a light pressure of her smooth thumb, she opened the silver heart again and held it in front of her, her face set.

Both Thomas and Petra saw that inside the delicately hammered shell lay another heart, roughly shaped out of brownish-gray matter.

"Chewed bread," said Vlasta, "smuggled out of a death cell at Pankrac Prison. . . . We loved one another."

Petra began to sob.

"Don't cry!" Vlasta said harshly, snapping the silver heart closed. "Don't cry! Help me to put it back on!"

Her fingers shaking, Petra fixed the stubborn clasp at the nape of Vlasta's neck.

Vlasta sat rigid.

"I'm sorry," Karel said again, "terribly sorry." He felt cheap.

Joseph slammed his hat down on the table, slipped out of his coat, wiped the sweat off his forehead, sat down, looked from one to the other, and said, "Well?"

"Well — what?" said Karel.

"I want an explanation!"

"I gave it to you over the phone."

"I think you're utterly irresponsible — all of you! Young people are in school to learn discipline, and their teachers are there to teach it, not to further infractions. Members of the family, no matter how sympathetic or romantic they may feel, cannot go in for the kind of escapades Thomas arranged and you, Karel, have abetted."

"Coffee, Joseph?" Karel asked, and to Petra, "If you don't mind, get the pot out of the kitchen."

"Thank you, no," said Joseph. "I don't intend to make a social evening of this." On the train, he had had several hours' time to prepare a scathing reproach. "I just want to say a few words to all of you. But first — Petra, tomorrow you and I are going back to Prague. . . ."

Perhaps it was best so, thought Karel. Remove the kid, remove Vlasta, remove everything that was vexing and unmanageable.

"Please —" Petra spoke up in a high voice strained by the excitement and hope of the recent days. "Please — I've never had a friend. Vlasta is my friend. . . ."

It stopped Joseph.

It dragged Karel out of the fog of his *what if's*. The business of the evening was not his fine cerebrations and measurings of conscience.

"Vlasta is her friend," he repeated, pointedly.

Joseph was fumbling. "Petra," he said, "what do you think your mother is going to say about this?"

"We can find that out later — after we know what we're going to do, and can tell Lida." Karel took his pipe out of the ash tray on the table. "I do think, however, that returning Petra to the Institute solves nothing and will be bad for her." He lit the pipe deliberately.

Joseph threw him a furious glance. "Keep your prescriptions! You don't like me in the job I have, and you don't like my child in the school I picked for her. If you want to run people's lives, get yourself some people who're too dumb to know your game. And for Christ's sakes, buy yourself some decent tobacco!" He noticed Vlasta's eyes wandering from him to Karel and back, and felt embarrassed over the dirty family linen he'd been washing before her. "And you, Miss Rehan!" he said gruffly, "did you know that Petra actually struck your employer in the face?"

"Yes," said Vlasta. "Mademoiselle had it coming to her."

Joseph studied her coldly. "Once upon a time, Miss Rehan, I was an employer myself. Mademoiselle Declerques is fully entitled —"

"I have left her employ, Mr. Benda."

He looked at her shoulders and breasts and grunted something. He seemed to have spent his anger, but recovered with an attack on Thomas, "By God, you know what I've been exposed to! And on top of that — the Declerques woman was hysterical. She came running to Parliament, had me pulled out of a committee meeting. She was on the verge of starting a police search! I had to threaten her to stop her, otherwise the whole mess would have come out in the Prague papers. Don't you people ever realize the consequences of what you do?"

Karel knocked the ashes out of his pipe. "And now that you've got all that off your chest, Joseph, what do you propose?"

Petra's head was nodding again, her dark curls hung loosely over her cheeks and moved slightly with her regular breathing.

"You should have put her to bed!" Joseph whispered hoarsely. He got up from his chair. One arm under Petra's knees, the other around her shoulders, he lifted her gently and carried her to Karel's bedroom. The door remained open behind him, and his brothers and Vlasta saw him lower her carefully to the bed, take off her shoes, cover her, and kiss her. Petra sleepily raised her hands to him and let them fall again on the tufted quilt.

"Poor waif," said Joseph as he noiselessly closed the door. "And I thought she really enjoyed being at the Institute. . . ."

Vlasta gave him a tired smile. "Did you enjoy being young, Mr. Benda?"

"I don't know," he said, "I don't remember."

"It's awfully difficult," said Vlasta, "especially if you get your love in dribs and drabs."

He liked her. The way she held her head reminded him of Magda Tessinova. "Now, now," he placated, sitting back and showing his masculine unconcern, "after all, every one of us managed to grow up!"

"Why, yes!" Thomas said maliciously. "We grew up, and it's plain that we're as happy as can be. . . . Why don't you give Petra a chance? You know she needs support and companionship and warmth —"

"Since when do *you* know when someone is in need of that?" Joseph cut into him. "You're as callous as you're irresponsible."

"Joseph!" Thomas had seen Vlasta's face. His own reddened with chagrin over the drunken boasts he had made to her of the secret bond between himself and his brother.

"What do you propose, Joseph?" Karel asked again.

"Bless the child's heart!" said Joseph, "she's bound to outgrow this, and one day will laugh at it. I will say, though, that she's shown courage — the Benda courage, Miss Rehan!" He was talking to hide the fact that he was baffled. If the Institute was bad for Petra — and he was half prepared to believe it — what could he do with her? And what would he tell Dolezhal and what would Dolezhal say? "Well, Miss Rehan — you've observed her. What do you feel we ought to do?"

Vlasta hesitated. One step after another, she had let herself be led into something that grew increasingly unfeasible, almost forbidding, and she certainly couldn't advance Thomas's plan and promote a job for herself. She restricted herself to, "It would not be advisable to send Petra back to Mademoiselle Declerques."

"Well," said Joseph, "is there any other boarding school of equal standing in Prague?"

"No. There are, of course, families that will take in boarders."

"Why not put her in an orphanage?" suggested Thomas.

"Oh, stop it, now!" Karel was very serious. "Here we are sitting together, the three of us, for the first time since I don't know when, to discuss the one thing — I hate to say this before Miss Rehan — the one thing that can bring us together, namely the only Benda of the next generation — and look at us!"

"I am neither callous nor irresponsible," Thomas stated. "Before Miss Rehan and I ever set to work to get Petra out . . ." He spoke guardedly. He had to hide how deeply he desired Vlasta to stay in Rodnik. "Before any of that, we had in mind a sort of arrangement . . ."

"You did?" Joseph said with some irony. "You might have consulted

me. And if you're so considerate and responsible, Thomas — why didn't you come to me and let me know what was up at the Institute? Why did I have to be told by Mademoiselle Declerques that my daughter had disappeared? Why did I have to fret and eat my heart out, hour after hour, imagining all sorts of things, worrying that she was in the hands of unscrupulous people, or run over, or wandering through the streets cold and hungry and without a penny? I'm her father, you know? I've got feelings, too!"

Thomas, whose attempt had been indecisive enough, reacted with morose silence. But Karel said coolly, "Leave your feelings out of it, Joseph. For once, we're going to tackle the issue not from your viewpoint, but from someone else's — Petra's."

"And I suppose you know what's best for the child and have it all down pat!"

"More or less," Karel replied. "It's Thomas's proposal, and it's good."

Thomas sat up. He hadn't expected Karel to back up his plan that solidly. Then he thought: The heart has done it. A heart made out of bread chewed by a lover I'll never be able to replace — a dead lover, a man who died in a cause for which I only mouthed words. . . . There was a tie between the blue number on Karel's arm and the age-hardened bread, and this tie excluded him.

"All right!" Joseph said impatiently, "let's have it!"

"Oh. Yes . . ." Thomas came to. "What I had in mind was —"

He began to develop the plan for Petra's education, the way he had sketched it to Vlasta in Prague; but his effort to be impersonal about it made him sound ponderous.

Joseph easily peeled the oratory off the essentials. The project had its points. He let Thomas talk on, and spent the time eying Vlasta. He had had women in Prague. There was an address on Avenue King George VI, first class and guaranteed to be politically reliable, because you had to watch your step in these affairs. But Vlasta was something else, something out of the ordinary, and to it would be added the titillation of her being under his own roof.

Thomas seemed to have finished. Joseph felt that the others were waiting for him.

"And you approve of this idea, Miss Rehan?"

"It's better for Petra that she stay here," she said.

"Very well, then!" Joseph tried to organize the scattered details of Thomas's suggestions, "so we'll re-enter her for form's sake in the Rodnik High School, and Miss Rehan will live at my house —" he saw Lida's flat nose puckered in doubt, saw the pleasant vista of the household with Vlasta

at the breakfast table — "I'm happy to welcome you, my dear; I'm sure you'll be comfortable."

"I don't know that I'll stay," she said.

"But without you, everything would be impossible!" Thomas's mouth trembled. "Without you — what will Petra . . ."

"Please, stay with us," said Karel — and wanted to retract his request the moment the words had formed themselves.

The ghost of his peasant grin played around Joseph's lips. "You gave up your job, Miss Rehan — where else would you go?"

Where else could she go? . . . "But I can't live in your home, Mr. Benda!" she said with renewed firmness.

"Of course you can!" Joseph was his most genial self. "There are no decent rooms to be had in this town. You'll be our guest, Mrs. Benda's and mine, and the financial arrangements, believe me, will be entirely to your satisfaction."

He extended his big paw.

She took it reluctantly. "I know mathematics, and languages," she said, and wanted to run. These Benda brothers who hacked at each other — and Petra, among them, had been like a stranger, too — the heart she had shown . . . What had she let herself in for?

"Oh, we'll divide the work!" Thomas's voice came warm and soothing. "I've got a degree in philosophy; I'll cover the other subjects."

"You?" said Joseph.

"Don't you trust me to know as much as a high school teacher?"

Joseph frowned. It was a remarkable offer coming from the great Spokesman, a most peculiar way of making up for a prank. "I'll pay Miss Rehan, naturally," he said, "but I take it your contribution is voluntary?"

"Sure, sure," said Thomas, his concentration on Vlasta. He had recaptured some of what he had felt before Petra came between him and the girl.

Petra, rubbing her eyes and yawning, appeared at the door of Karel's bedroom. She looked small in her stocking feet. "You're going to stay with us in Rodnik!" Karel greeted her.

"Vlasta, too?"

"Vlasta, too," he said and promised himself that, for his own part, he would try to hold to the *status quo* between Kitty and himself.

Karel cleared the cups and saucers off the wax cloth and dumped the ashes into the refuse can in his kitchen. When he returned, Thomas was still in his chair at the table. His face was sagging and his eyes sat deep in their sockets.

"Do you want another cup of coffee?"

Thomas stared at his suitcase which stood in a corner, and said, "I'm going. I should have left with Joseph and the girls." But he didn't move.

Karel sat down, careful of the doilies, stretched his legs, and listened to the creaking of the old leather chair.

"I can't face it," he heard Thomas say.

"Can't face what — Kitty?"

"Why do you say that?"

"You like Vlasta, don't you?" said Karel. "You made it very obvious."

Thomas pushed Karel's comment aside.

"Now you listen to me. I like Vlasta. I think she is an exceptional woman. But that has nothing whatsoever to do with Kitty! The two are on entirely different levels. . . ." He waved his hand angrily. "Don't make faces at me! I'm a writer, an artist! I need people, stimulation!"

"Do you believe that Kitty will understand that?"

"I'm not hurting anyone. All that ever happens is that I get hurt. And if I finally find a person with a feeling for my problems, for what moves me, for what tears me to pieces, you can think of nothing but a coitus!"

Karel shrugged. "Then why don't you go home?"

"Because she'll ask me questions."

"But Kitty doesn't even know of Vlasta's existence — unless you've written her."

Thomas snorted. "Questions about the Essay!"

"Your essay —"

With a few steps, Thomas was at his suitcase, tore it open, brought the manuscript to Karel, and dropped it on his lap. "They threw it back at me. Times have changed, they said."

"Did you try another publisher?"

"No. What for?"

Thomas coming to him and pleading with him to let him write a novel about Karel Benda who had survived. . . . Thomas searching for the truth, for sense and for meaning, and being rejected, always rejected. . . . Karel looked down at the manuscript. He felt at this moment that the refusal to publish it was more an indictment of himself than of Thomas or of the times and their circumstances.

Thomas said acidly, "Perhaps you can think of a pretty phrase I might hand Kitty? Something that will make up to her for two years of skimping and eating leftovers? Something to keep up her belief in me?"

Karel put the manuscript on the table.

"What am I going to tell her?" asked Thomas again.

"I'd like to read it," Karel said.

"You have any liquor in the house? If I got home dead drunk, there'd be no way she could force me to answer anything."

"Sorry, I haven't. And you're going to go home and tell Kitty the truth, because I know her and I know she can take it and she can help you to take it. You've been married a good long while, and maybe —"

Karel stopped. Thomas certainly knew that if he murdered someone he'd be able to go home and bury his head at Kitty's bosom, and she would hide him and protect him.

"I said I'd like to read your essay, Thomas. Will you let me?"

Thomas massaged his forehead. Barsiny had told him that he fitted in no groove, and although that didn't get the book published, it was a great compliment. It lifted him high above the crowd; Karel was part of the crowd and distinctly part of a groove.

"I don't care what you do with it," he said after a while, ungraciously. "Why do you want to read it?"

Karel looked straight at him. "I'm going to talk politics, Thomas."

"Talk anything you like!"

"If Humanita rejected your essay after you wrote that statement which was so useful to Joseph and Dolezhal, there must be something in the book they don't like. And it's probable that I am going to be interested in what they don't like."

"You're a fool, Karel. You believe in black and white."

Karel stood up. His gaunt shoulders were tired and hunched, but his eyes were wide awake and held Thomas.

"There's a whole scale of grays between black and white," he said. "But somewhere, light ends and darkness begins. There *is* a border line, and you're either on one side of it or on the other. That's what I want to find out."

"Let me know where you file me away, will you?"

"I will," said Karel. "And give my love to Kitty."

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE SMALL wine restaurant was perched against the steep side of Hradcany Hill. In summer, many people came to it, to sit for a while on its porch and enjoy the view of the Moldau's curving band and the crooked chimneys, the many-fingered towers, the patinaed roofs of the city. They would have a glass or two of native wine, or perhaps beer, and then move on to make room for other excursionists. At this time of the year, however, the restaurant was most often empty; its porch was closed

off, the arched, smoke-discolored ceiling of its interior was never quite lit by the lamps at the few tables occupied by guests.

Dolezhal had picked the place because he was reasonably sure that no one who knew him would think of coming here, and because there were enough tables to insure getting a secluded one.

"So Petra is back in Rodnik again?" he said over his second glass of wine. "Too bad. She was like a bright light in these dark times."

Joseph explained uncomfortably, "I've had to take her back. The atmosphere here in Prague, you understand. . . . There's too much going on which Lida and I felt was not good for her."

The Minister's beautiful gray hair had lost some of its sheen; perhaps the events were affecting his glands, perhaps he had run out of the right kind of oil, or he no longer had time to have scalp treatments.

"That's our trouble," he said, "the things that are going on are no good for our children, for ourselves — or for anybody. But there'll be an end to that!"

Joseph had his eyes fixed on the Minister's small white hand that kept sliding up and down the slender stem of his glass. Joseph knew that this twosome with Dolezhal would be somehow decisive. He had suspected it when the Minister, as if by chance, had run into him at the former Stock Exchange and had suggested a little walk to let the winter air cool their heated brains. When the walk extended without anything of importance being said, when he observed Dolezhal looking back frequently, when their way took them across the river to the other side of town and up the hill, Joseph was positive that Dolezhal had assigned him some prominent part in some momentous matter. He had felt complimented and at the same time anxious. Something had to be very wrong if the chief of the Party, with so many reliable, experienced hands available, felt compelled to enlist the help and confidence of such a junior member of the organization as himself.

"You know General Duchinsky, don't you?" Dolezhal asked, without preamble.

"He was my commanding officer in England."

"Do you still see him?"

"I met him last when the budgetary committee discussed the military appropriation. He was submitting some figures to us. . . ."

"But you're quite friendly with him?"

"Not socially. Even in England, you rarely could get close to him. However, we always got along. Why do you ask?"

The Minister's hand came away from the glass and stabbed toward Joseph. "Because we need him!"

"What for?"

"Don't be so damnably slow!" Impatience jarred Dolezhal's voice. "Don't tell me you have no idea that something is bound to happen and that it is far better if we make it happen!"

Joseph smarted under the tone of superiority. "I'm not in the inner councils of the Party!" he said, and quietly refilled the Minister's glass.

Dolezhal scratched his mustache and said nothing. This was a fine time to have to smear balm on hurt egos! But he needed Duchinsky, and Joseph was his only reliable contact to the Air Force General.

"I told you enough when we withdrew your nice little bill," he grumbled. "Do you want to have socialization of everything written into the new Constitution?"

"What has the new Constitution got to do with Duchinsky?"

"Do you want to help us or not, Joseph Benda? Something has to be done before the pressure on us grows too heavy to fight. And for that stage of the game, we must have the Army either on our side or at least completely neutralized."

"A coup?"

Joseph managed to press out the two fateful words. His heart pumped against his chest with sudden vehemence. He was stupid to ask such a question. As if he didn't know! As if, underneath, he hadn't thought of it many a time — from the day when Kravat forced him into the humiliating pre-election debate with Stanek, to the horrible hour when his own workers almost rose to lynch him, to Karel's warning that he'd better resign. Democracy was a wonderful thing as long as you controlled it and made it function your way; once it turned against you, it ceased to be desirable. And yet — if it came to that — if force, guns, planes had to be used against his own people who had stood with him around his Christmas tree . . .

He had learned of democracy in school. From his first conscious years, he had soaked up the tradition of the Czech fight against the Imperial Austrian police. He had left his own country, given up his own factory, to make war in the name of this democracy. . . .

"A coup!" Dolezhal said deprecatingly. "Don't worry your head about that! Everything will be done according to parliamentary rules and regulations. We're experts in that."

"Then why do we need Duchinsky?"

"Once you were in some sort of underground business against the Nazis and the Hacha Government. Did you inquire into the reasons for every order you received?"

"But that was different!"

"In what way was it different?"

Joseph considered. He had lost his Benda Works then and he had lost

them now. He thought of the mob at the meeting. It had been a touch-and-go situation — but you didn't call in Duchinsky and the Air Force! That was the difference.

"Perhaps you do not know the people as I know them," he said. "I meet them every day in my work in the industry. Sometimes, they go off half-cocked; sometimes, they need curbing; yet on the whole, I think, they're reasonable men and women. . . ."

There was a lot Dolezhal could have said about people and their reasoning and how it worked. All his worries stemmed from the fact that these nice, reasonable people had taken it into their heads to deprive Joseph Benda of everything he and his father and his grandfather had worked so hard to build up, and that this was happening all over the country. But the Minister did not bother to argue that.

Instead, he said, "*A propos* industry — for a while, you are going to cease meeting those people of yours in your daily work. You're going to resign as National Administrator of the Benda Works and also of the Hammer Works in Martinice, whatever has remained of them."

Joseph set his elbows on the table, hard. A little of the wine in the Minister's freshly filled glass spilled.

Dolezhal reached for his paper napkin and dried the wet spots. "You don't like that? After the fire, you wanted to! . . ."

First Karel, now Dolezhal — they were cornering him from both sides. "It's out of the question," said Joseph.

The Minister's small hands became ironically expressive. "My Councilor Novak has become a very powerful man. He suggested it, and I should like to oblige him."

"And I won't do it!" Joseph stated hoarsely.

"Don't make a scene, the waiter will hear you!" Dolezhal placed the crumpled napkin on the ash tray.

"I won't do it!" Joseph repeated.

"Oh yes, you will. You will resign because —"

"Minister Dolezhal! I've always been loyal and followed orders. I accepted the low position on the ballot, knowing that, if at all, I'd squeeze in by the skin of my teeth, and that you were using me for my following in Rodnik. I let you take away the one decent thing I wanted to put through — my *Lex Blaha*. But I refuse to be the sacrificial lamb permanently and to be offered up to the whims of your Councilor and his crowd. Why, not two weeks ago, my own brother Karel, the doctor — you know of him, he belongs to that crowd, too — he comes to me and what does he ask? That I resign!"

"They always run in packs," Dolezhal said with equanimity.

"Which doesn't make them any less dangerous. They must be pretty

well organized if they dare to use you for what one of their own kind couldn't put over!"

An eloquent gesture of Dolezhal's stopped in midair. "And what makes you think *we're* not well organized? Do you presume I don't know that any attack on you is an attack on our Party, an attack on me? Hasn't it occurred to you that I might have thought of that?"

"If I resign," Joseph said stubbornly, "it'll be their victory."

"You mean, it'll *look* like their victory."

"It's the same thing from where I sit."

"If you would only let me finish what I want to say! . . . You will resign because in a couple of months you will come back to Benda and to Hammer — not as manager, not as National Administrator — but as the man who owns them."

Joseph sat very still. There was a slight obstruction in his throat, and his breath came in little wheezing sounds to which he was listening.

"And how are you going to achieve that?" he finally asked.

"It will be done according to parliamentary rules and regulations — I told you!" Dolezhal was complacent. "It's all planned, and part of it is giving them enough rope to hang themselves. Politics, to be truly effective, must be played with finesse."

His mustache tittered.

"Let them think they've won out over you, Benda. Don't you see the humor in the situation?"

Joseph began to see it. He, himself, in his own rough way, had pulled political fast ones — but he had ladled it out; the Minister was doing it by the soupçon.

Dolezhal raised his glass.

Joseph laughed, at first uncertainly, then with more and more abandon. Some of his wine got into his windpipe; he coughed, and struggled to clear his throat, and was abruptly serious. "And if it doesn't work out as you said it would?"

"You're not alone in this, Benda, and neither am I. This thing is so big that I couldn't go into its ramifications if I wanted to. Tremendous! Bigger than this little country! . . . Now about Duchinsky —" he stabbed at Joseph. "Duchinsky won't be too difficult because he's a career man, and because he served in England, and because he is ambitious. . . ."

"I see."

"Still, be careful. Don't ever forget what is at stake!"

"I won't forget," said Joseph.

But Duchinsky was not quite so easy as Dolezhal had made Joseph assume.

They had a famous old time exchanging memories; they talked of the blackout on Leicester Square, of the great show their squadron had made over the Channel and over Europe, of how the times had changed; and General Duchinsky spoke lovingly of his wife who was a British girl and a first cousin of Lady Chittenden, and who was at present spending a few weeks with her relatives in Devonshire.

However, on the main subject, which Joseph broached slowly and with great circumspection, Duchinsky remained reserved. He was ambitious and a careerist, all right, but he seemed to feel that his career was assured regardless of which party or combination of parties staffed the Cabinet.

He expanded his broad, beribboned chest and smiled all over his round, cheery, efficient-looking face. "I'm a soldier, my dear Joseph Benda. I can fly a plane, I can take apart its engine, I can organize, I can tell you where to hit and what to bomb with how many planes and how much explosives to achieve a certain tactical or strategic result. But I'm not a politician."

That was a lie; and they both knew it. Any high-ranking officer who had fought with an army-in-exile, who had had to wangle supplies and matériel from foreign quartermaster services, had to be a politician, just to stay alive and to keep on fighting. And if anything, politics within the Army had increased after the war: there were the Russian and the Western schools who differed in their conception of strategy and discipline, in their philosophy and individual tastes, depending on whether they had served on the Eastern front or in the West; there were the hangovers from the old Austro-Hungarian officers' corps, and those who had stayed in the country during the Nazi occupation, some of them having gone into the underground, and others having survived by compromising. If a man like Boris Duchinsky had managed to float on top of this hodge-podge of differing interests and loyalties, and if he could get and hold as important a command as his, he had to be a very good politician indeed.

Duchinsky knew where his interests lay. With his background, he was a natural to side with Dolezhal. Then why his reticence? It brought back Joseph's doubts. Were the pressures too great, already? Was Dolezhal provoking something that couldn't be carried through? . . . No, that was nonsense; Dolezhal was not the man to undertake anything for whose success the chances were less than excellent. Joseph wished to God that the Minister hadn't been so secretive. Who was on their side? On whom could they count? There was the Party organization, of course, with its many fronts among students and women and shop owners, and what strength it had among the trade unions; there were the Catholics, particularly in Slovakia, with the inestimable influence of the clergy through the pulpit, through the confessional, through welfare organizations and social groups and bedside visits; there were the peasants who were deathly afraid

that the land they had just received would be taken away once more for some wild experiments in collectivism; and there were, no doubt, a good number of middle-of-the-road socialists who wanted their reforms handed to them peacefully and who, for all their radical words, were mild and comfortable fellows.

If you added up the columns and looked at the figures, there could be no doubt as to the outcome. And still, Duchinsky was hedging.

"Your wife," Joseph said suddenly — "do you expect her back, soon, from her visit to her English family?"

"Yes, I do."

"We must get together socially, sometime. But that's not why I mentioned her. . . ."

He stopped. Duchinsky had stiffened. Maybe the General resented the social note. Duchinsky was a snob and a fool, or perhaps too much of a gentleman to catch the inference. Well — it was low and somehow unclean to ring in a man's family; but whose family was not affected by this struggle?

The General's throat was working above the tight collar of his greenish-gray shirt. "Why did you mention Madame Duchinsky?"

Duchinsky *had* caught on.

"Look here, General," said Joseph, "you've known me as a soldier, as a patriotic man, as a person of democratic convictions. And what happened to me? First they took away my factory. So the Government appointed me National Administrator. I did my job as conscientiously as I knew how, as conscientiously as I fought in the war, as conscientiously as you do yours. And now I'm being forced to resign."

"About my wife!" demanded the General.

"I've got a wife, too. She isn't a titled lady; she's got a little business. And very likely, they'll take away that, too."

"Do you mean to imply, Benda, that someone would want to kick me out of my command because I married a woman I loved?"

"My Minister seemed to think so. . . ." Joseph cursed Dolezhal who had wished this on him. He was no conspirator. And he was sorry for Duchinsky.

He talked fast. "*Our* Party would like to keep you out of harm. But it's the others who will get hold of the whip if things continue the way they are drifting. . . . You say you are a soldier and nothing but a soldier. Will they believe it? They will say: Ah, Duchinsky, hasn't he got a British wife? A relation of Lady Chittenden, English aristocracy, the rich, that's what he's married into! How can we trust him? . . . They won't ask any questions of you, they don't want any answers. They don't care if you can pin-point an objective and destroy it with minimum expense

and the minimum loss of life. They will take away your command as they took away my factory, they'll pension you off at a few crowns unless they trump up some charges and put you away somewhere. My God, you know how that's done; there are enough men on your staff to whom it happened under the Nazis!"

Nervously, Duchinsky patted his crew haircut. He was a well-knit kind of man with a strength that had carried him without sleep through days of the most harrowing operations in England. But now, this strength appeared sapped.

"I know," he said darkly, "I know how it is. I've known it for a long time and feared it."

"And are you going to sit there and wait till they enter this door, and throw you out and put in your place one of their creatures who can recite Marx backwards but who's never seen the inside of a plane?"

"I don't understand people any more," said Duchinsky. "A man does his duty — isn't that enough for them?"

Joseph appreciated the question. "Who knows! . . . There's no end to what they want once we let them get started. You could make application to join their Party and hope they believe you mean it. You could divorce your wife and hope they accept you and forgive your bourgeois past —"

"I'm a soldier!" said Duchinsky.

"I thought so. Can we rely on you?"

The General looked down at his uniform, at the buttons with the crossed swords, at his trim, firm stomach, the fine crease of his pants.

"You're not planning anything crazy? I'm a soldier, I've got a commander in chief — the President. . . ." His harried voice ended in a whisper.

Joseph laughed tightly. "You needn't be troubled about that. All will be done according to parliamentary rules and regulations . . ." and he finished the quote from Dolezhal with a certain relish . . . "we're experts in that, you see!"

"That's better," said Duchinsky, visibly eased, "much better. Nothing illegal! I couldn't go along with that!"

"Nothing illegal," promised Joseph, because he wanted nothing of the sort either. "But you are going along?"

The General uneasily led his finger along the edge of a shell fragment which served as a paperweight. "I know your heart's in the right spot, Benda, and your aims are good —"

"Please, don't misunderstand us, General. We are not pressuring you. We are not asking you to do anything. All we want is that you do nothing at all, when the time comes."

"I can't say Yes or No, like that. Let me think about it. Let me listen around what the others are thinking. Come back next week. . . ."

"Next week, fine," said Joseph. Duchinsky was a weak sister. He had liked the General, even admired him, back in the old days in England. But then, perhaps, the decisions of war were easier than those which had to be made now. In any case, tentative as the commitment was, it was better than none at all; and once committed, Duchinsky wouldn't be able to backtrack on his own steps.

The General was again displaying his bluff smile. "Next week," he said, "I may have some information for you." He was thinking, too, behind his smile. I haven't said anything definite, pledged no action. Maybe things aren't as critical as this Benda wants me to believe. After all, a man who only does his duty is fairly immune. . . . "And don't worry, Benda, I'll keep everything under my hat."

"I am not worried," said Joseph, "and I'll be back."

But as he left the General and came out onto the street, he felt a drawing in his breast as if his ribs were about to cave in. If Dolezhal should complain that it took too long to bring Duchinsky in line — so what! He wasn't afraid of Dolezhal. What bothered him was something else. If the most logical men for the plan were that weak, that hesitant — what, then, did numbers mean?

On his way back to Parliament, he stopped at the main post office to send off a cable to Elinor Simpson, begging her to come over, and indicating that a big story was going to break. Perhaps she knew already and was on her way; she had her stringers and informants in Prague. It was important that she be here and cover whatever might happen. She had her limitations; but she had a heart for poor little Czechoslovakia, and maybe a lot of sympathy would be needed from the United States.

Joseph shoved the cable across the counter to the official. It wasn't sympathy for poor little Czechoslovakia he wanted from her, really, but an insurance policy just in case. With her connections to the American Embassy, she could get a visa for himself, and Lida, and Petra overnight, as she had done for Thomas and Kitty. He frowned. There was no earthly reason for opening a rear exit with not even a ghost knocking at the front door of his house!

He stretched out his hand as if to ask the official for the return of the blank; but when the man had counted the words and stated the cost, he paid.

The bell had long since sounded two o'clock. Instead of hurrying home, as they did on other days, the men of the morning shift hung around in the yard of the Benda Works, braving the wet, miserable cold, talking in subdued voices, clapping their arms, and glancing more and more frequently toward the door of the office building.

Over Sunday, a rumor had sprung up and quickly made the rounds

from one glassworker's home to the other — that a meeting of the Works Council had been called for Monday morning, and that Joseph Benda was going to resign as National Administrator.

There were those who refused to believe it and said, "He'd rather kill himself than give up the Works." Others argued that after the fire at Hammer nothing else could be expected, and that it was high time for Joseph Benda to see that he was through, as far as the men in the Rodnik glass industry were concerned. Some workers to whom the old days, in retrospect, appeared pleasant, remembered the close relationship they had had with the Benda family and were thoughtful. "It won't be the same without him," they said, and one of the younger men agreed, "It certainly won't, thank God."

"He won't starve!" said Viteslav Czerny. "He's got his nest egg socked away, you can be sure of that. And we gave him a fine job in the National Assembly, pays him plenty — I wish I made mine as easy as he makes his. And look at Vesely's! A gold mine!"

"Strikes me he won't agree to a thing unless he gets more out of it than he puts in. I wonder what the deal is this time!" said another man, and Blatnik added, "That Works Council of ours had better take a close look at the books!"

He kicked a broken beechwood form and let the pieces sail over the partially frozen ground. Some voices were raised against him, and a man muttered that Blatnik, of all people, should keep his mouth shut. "Always picking up a scandal! Always making trouble!"

At that moment, the door to the office building opened. But it was only Dr. Karel Benda with his little bag, leaving the infirmary.

"Hey, Doctor, what's going on in there?"

Karel shrugged.

"That's an awfully long meeting!"

"Don't you talk to your brother? Don't you know what's up?"

Karel wished he did know. The rumors, which seemed to have some basis in fact, had surprised him as much as the others — or more. It remained to be seen, of course, whether Joseph actually would resign. But if he did, what had happened to drum sense into his skull?

Karel gripped his bag more firmly and started out across the yard, making his way between the groups of waiting men, and taking care not to set his cracked shoes on the thin ice covering the puddles. But before he reached the big main gate of the Works, the yard sprang into action. It made him stop and turn.

On top of the step that led to the door of the office building stood Joseph, his fur-lined coat open, his soft gray felt shoved back from his forehead; he was smiling at a somber Kravat standing alongside him.

The men moved up closer. The restless babble of voices was stilled by Kravat's hand.

"My friends!" said Joseph.

Despite the length of the conference and the difficult decisions which he must have had to make, Joseph appeared in a remarkably even temper. He's always had a considerable ability to bounce back, thought Karel — and who knows what goes on behind that thick forehead of his?

"There comes a time in life," Joseph began, "when a man must make up his mind as to what he wants. I am speaking that personally, because most of you know me quite well and must have a hunch about how I've felt these last months — these last years. . . ."

Karel saw him gaze over the yard, mop his face, and press his fingers against his forehead. It *was* harder on Joseph than he let on.

"This neither-nor business is not good for anybody, not for you and not for me. I've tried it long enough, haven't I?"

His hand swept in a large circle.

"All of this used to be mine, and I loved it, and loved to work for it. Times change, people change; who mourns for the stubbles on last year's fields?"

The men were very quiet. From the grinding room, in which the afternoon shift was at work, came the wailing sound of the glass as its rims were being smoothed down by the eternally revolving horizontal sandstone wheels. This sound, and the tone of Joseph's voice, made Karel sad, and sorry for his brother, and they submerged the question: Why is Joseph doing it? Why *now*? Why did he refuse, to me? Why did he tell me he couldn't resign even if he wanted to?

"I could work here," said Joseph, "and do a good job and help you, under two conditions: If I'd never owned it, or if I owned it again."

His face smoothed out as if he were enjoying a sublime vision, and Karel wondered, through all his sympathy, whether a memory of the great past alone could create so beatific an expression.

Then Joseph's heavy lids opened, his face became sober, and he said, "But as things are, the strain has become too great — you understand, I'm sure. And a man must be capable of making a radical break. That's what I'm doing. Maybe it is better for you people, too. Be on your own, completely, and see how it works out and see how you like it."

Joseph pulled down his hat and buttoned his coat.

"So your Works Council has agreed to accept my resignation as National Administrator, subject to approval by the District National Committee in Limberk, and to have your old fellow worker, Mr. Frantishek Kravat, take over in my place. Franta," he turned and reached for Kravat's hand, "good luck! . . . And good luck to you all!"

He bent down and picked up something which he had placed against the door post. Karel recognized it, even at this distance. It was the portrait of Peter Benda that had hung on the wall of Joseph's office. Holding the large picture carefully, Joseph came down the steps and walked through the men, who willingly and respectfully made an aisle for him. They were silent; the eyes of some were moist; and some started to come to him and grasp his hand, but stopped, feeling that it would be wrong to intrude on him at this moment. Some wanted to cheer, for Joseph, or for Kravat, or for themselves who were finally and unalterably free of even the shadow of their former boss. But somehow, no cheer materialized.

Joseph nodded to Karel and strode out through the main gate without looking back. Then he waited for Karel to catch up with him.

"Here," he said, "it's a big thing, help me carry it."

Karel took one end of the frame of his father's picture, and, holding the portrait horizontally between them, so that it joined as well as separated them, the two brothers went across the stone bridge over the little Suska River and uphill again toward the town.

"Are you satisfied, now?" said Joseph.

"You did the best thing." Karel's voice carried some of what he felt for his brother at this moment. "It was hard, wasn't it?"

"Hard?" Joseph asked back. "I'll tell you something. You're a sentimental fool, you've always been one. And if you don't watch out, you'll get hurt one of these days."

When he came home, Lida was there. The dining room was a mess — all the drawers of the credenza were pulled out, the silverware was heaped on the table, and Lida was shining it.

"For Heaven's sake, what are you doing here?" he asked. "Why aren't you at your office? Why isn't the maid cleaning this stuff?"

Lida was pale, but her red-rimmed eyes and the inflamed wings of her nose told him that she had been crying.

"Can't trust the maid," she said.

"She's never stolen anything!"

"Who talks of stealing? I can't pack the silver dirty, can I? And I can't let her know that I'm packing — her, and your Miss Rehan!"

"Why — pack?"

She came up to him. Her pinafore was awry, her hands roughened from the chemical she had been using. She stroked his cheeks, "I've been poor, once. I've had nothing, before. This time, we'll take along what we've got left, all of it!"

"Take it along where? What are you talking about?"

"Poor darling," she said softly. "You don't know how it is. But I do. I've

lived away from home, in one small room. I've brought up your child, and starved, in one small room. It's fine silver, it's worth a lot, it may bring a good price. . . ."

She picked up a soup spoon and a wad of grayish, sticky cotton and began to rub.

"You've given up the Works," she said. "You've given up everything. That's the end."

He stared at her, at the lines that circled her neck, at her flat, straight nose that now reminded him of the hollow in a death's-head.

"You're out of your mind, Lida!"

Then he gathered her into his arms and buried her face at his shoulder.

She permitted the embrace for a moment, then freed herself and returned to her silver. "We must buy a lot of things," she said, "and quickly, and so that no one notices. Perhaps I should go to Prague and attend to it; it's easier there. Things of lasting value. Gold and pieces of jewelry."

He sat down. His hands were trembling.

"Where did you get the idea that we are leaving?"

His sober tone seemed to recall her to a sensible consideration of matters. "What is Vescly's without Benda?" she asked. "Like a tree without roots. What do you want me to do — stand in line for a handout of raw glass from Kravat?"

He felt better. He leaned back and laughed. "No, of course not!"

"Can't you see them gang up on us — all the other refiners whom we've been cutting out and converting into little branch factories of our own?" Again he laughed. "It will be taken care of."

"When?"

"Shortly."

"How?"

He hesitated. Then, seeing her tragic face, he pulled himself up and announced, "We will take back Benda. We will take back Hammer. Not just through some phony setup — but as ours, really ours."

"Now who's out of his mind?" she asked cuttingly. "And the millennium is around the corner, too?"

Joseph grew annoyed. A woman might lose her nerve, hysteria was well and good, but everything in its place and at the right time and with moderation. His own fears were dammed up; she didn't have to burrow at the dam and try to tear down what he had built.

"Listen, Lida, I can't tell you much. The fewer the people who know and the less they know, the better. There will be changes, terrific, wonderful changes, and it'll be soon. These changes have to be prepared. And part of this preparation was what I did this morning."

She nodded abstractedly. Her eyes swerved back to the silver piled on

the table. "I understand," she said. "You threw away the Works to those thieves just so as to take them back?"

"Precisely."

"You throw a cake to the pigs and then hope to fish it out of the trough again and eat it yourself?"

"This particular cake — out of this particular trough — yes."

"Poor Joseph," she said. "Poor Joseph. . . ."

He squirmed. "You've got to have some confidence in me. Didn't I always carry through what I said I would?"

Her eyes became small with contempt, her mouth thinned out, and her voice came high like an old woman's. "The people to whom you abdicated your patrimony are not the kind of people who will give it up. They will fight. They are so many. They are everywhere. They are like locusts — horrible, horrible, horrible!"

"Don't worry!" he said. "Lida, darling, don't worry!"

But the dam was broken, and fear flooded him down to his toes.

He got up heavily. He had to catch the train back to Prague. He had to go on doing what he was doing. There was no backtracking — not for him, not for anybody.

CHAPTER NINE

Our age, with its highly developed means of mass communication, has substituted slogan for thought, shibboleth for emotion, propaganda for the exchange and discussion of ideas. How, then, can the average man, nourished on his carefully measured daily dose of predigested food for the mind, weigh independently the facts governing his own life and his neighbors'? How can he formulate conclusions, how act on them like a mature person who has achieved the full growth of citizenship?

From the very outset, his scale of values has been tampered with by those who control the media of communication. The individual does not choose; he is subtly, and sometimes not so subtly, pushed toward a certain choice. Since the people are only a conglomeration of individuals, and since democracy is based on the people's preferences, we cannot but suspect the validity of democracy as we know it.

If 51 per cent of the people, stimulated by some headline, shout "Hosannah!" the other 49 must tolerate the nuisance; but let some high-powered source organize different headlines, which move 2 per cent of the people into the opposite column, and the cry of the majority becomes "Crucify!"

We are told of the unfailing instinct of the people and that, in the aggre-

gate, the mass will recognize the truth and do the right thing. We Czechs only need look North and West to our German neighbors to see how tragically wrong the vast majority of a whole nation can be.

The instinct of the people may have been sufficient in times when the town crier was the source of news, when an occasional traveler came to the village to tell of some faraway war; though history records the numerous mass follies of those days. But for the present, the question asked by Thomas G. Masaryk in *The Ideals of Humanity* still remains to be answered: "If the individual is nothing, if his opinions and conscience are meaningless, how then can thousands of individuals be counted not only as significant but ultimately as the be-all?"

Masaryk stated this question polemically; he himself did not believe that the individual and his opinions and conscience are meaningless. The individual's opinions and conscience, and democracy along with them, can have great validity—but only under conditions which do not exist now and which must be created. Without these conditions there can be no freedom; without them, the instinct of the people becomes a mockery.

What are these conditions? Obviously, they involve a change in the control of the means of mass communication. But this brings up a new and even more thorny problem: Who, then, is to control them? And isn't such control, isn't any control, the negation of the very freedom it is to achieve and guarantee?

From THOMAS BENDA: *Essay on Freedom*

KAREL paused more often than necessary as he walked up the winding road to the house on St. Nepomuk. He had been to see Mrs. Flicek, who lived at the foot of the hill; so he had taken along his brother's manuscript on the chance that he might have the time to go up to Thomas's. Mrs. Flicek, who was big with her third child, should have known better than to send her oldest running for the doctor. When he had rushed to her and examined her, the labor pains turned out to be false. It left him with plenty of time but with no excuse to postpone returning the "Essay on Freedom."

Below him, in the valley, lay the wintry town, the rags of snow clinging to the green onion shape of the church's belfry, the neat pattern of roads converging on the market square. If Mrs. Flicek's unborn had not decided to spend a few more days in the comfortable warmth of the uterus, the afternoon would have meant launching the new Flicek into the world, instead of talking to Thomas, seeing Kitty, and learning about Vlasta's effect on the two on St. Nepomuk.

He trudged on. When he reached Thomas's house, the sky was darken-

ing — the days were still short. Kitty's face was indistinct in the hallway, no lights were on in the house; she must have been sitting in the twilight, doing nothing.

"You've come to see me —" Her voice hovered between joy and relief and embarrassment at his finding her as she was.

The hallway was a short, fairly narrow passage; he smelled the fragrance of her hair. "How are you, Kitty?" he asked.

"You should have called up before you came. No — I would have told you I was busy. And I'm not busy, not busy at all."

"Where's Thomas?"

She switched on the light. The shadows disappeared. "He's not in," she said. "He's never in at this time of the day. Will you have a cup of tea? We've some cake left over from lunch. . . ."

She stood there, pulling her sleeves over her wrists and smoothing her hair self-consciously. An old sweater covered her house dress, since the rooms were rather cold. There was a certain tawdriness about her, and Karel was shocked by it. She was no longer dressing for anyone, she wore no lipstick, and her face had the pallor of someone who stays indoors too much.

"Where is Thomas?" he asked again. "I came to return the copy of his essay. I've read it —"

"He's at Joseph's, teaching Petra. He goes there every afternoon." She held out her arm for his coat and begged, "Stay, why don't you? I've lost track of the months since you were here last."

If Mrs. Flicek's labor pains had been real, he thought, his hands might now be grasping the forceps, his eyes might be watching the misshapen, slime-covered little skull work its way out from between giant, twitching thighs — oh, Jesus, we're all born in agony and live in it, and there's no security except in that womb, and the unborn clinging to it was the wisest of us all.

He gave her his coat and waited till she had put it on a hanger and then followed her into the living room. "I'll get the tea," she said. For a while, she was puttering in the kitchen. He listened. His thoughts lined up against him. What had he done to her, blasting the feeble foundations of her existence by supporting Vlasta's stay in Rodnik? Did she have to be dragged through this collapse of what little she had to hold on to? If he loved her, why hadn't he spared her that? Or why didn't he tell her to come with him now — take her away, persuade her or force her, but get her out of this mire of half-hopes and pretenses and indecisions?

She came back, served him and herself, and sat down expectantly. Her face was animated, now; she must have used the minutes while the water

was heating to change her dress, comb her hair, and make up her lips; or else, the shaded lamp next to the settee was more flattering than the white light in the hallway.

He kept stirring the sugar in his cup and looking at her hands. They were red from housework, but their strong, tapered fingers were still beautiful.

"Tell me about the Essay!" she said. "What do you think of it? Do you feel it still has a chance?"

"It's very much like Thomas. It's provoking." His smile was wry. "Sometimes I was furious at it, sometimes I loved it. Even when I wanted to shove it aside, I had to admire it. It's courageous, and sincere — and no matter how it hits you, you have to respect the tremendous amount of work he put into it."

"That's really your opinion, Karel?"

The hell with the Essay! he wanted to say; but, instead, he continued reviewing. "He has a wonderful knack for making you doubt all the comfortable, long-accepted commonplaces — and without preaching. The thing forces you to think for yourself. It's disturbing and stimulating and annoying, and there is some arrogance in it, too — I often had the feeling that the Essay supports only one kind of freedom: complete and absolute freedom for Thomas Benda; only one kind of control: control exercised by himself. But that's not so unusual. In fact, it's very human."

"You're the only one who understands him," she said softly.

"I wish I didn't!" he broke out. "I wish I weren't his brother; I wish I had no concern for him whatsoever!"

Her head came up. "Don't, Karel."

"Do you want me to go?"

It was as if she hadn't heard him. "He stands so alone," she said.

"He wants it that way. He keeps himself above the fight, above you, above everything. And it shows in his book. I'll tell you what his book lacks — heart!"

"So it should have been turned down?" she said, dispirited.

"No! It deserves to be printed. I think I know a way of getting it printed, and that's what I wanted to discuss with Thomas. He's been with the wrong people, they used him, and now they are weaseling. But there are people who are not afraid of giving the minds of a few thousand men and women something to chew on."

He sounded quite angry and determined, but the softening of the lines around his eyes and mouth spoke of something else that came from the depth of his heart and ran underneath the precision of his statement; and he knew that she was listening to this rather than to his opinions.

"Thomas will be back around six," she said so factually that it became

apparent to him that she, too, was voicing one thing and feeling another. Then she added, "Unless he stays to have dinner with Vlasta Rehan."

He attempted to gauge the tone in which she mentioned the name. But the effort was swamped by his realization that Thomas wouldn't be back until six, perhaps later.

"I can't wait for him," he said abruptly.

She nodded.

"It's a shame I can't wait," he said. "I almost never come up here."

She nodded again, as if she were saying: I know; I know why; you don't have to explain.

"Tell him what I said. Tell him I'll be going to Prague shortly; I'll show the book to some friends of mine. Tell him to phone me if he doesn't want me to."

"He acts as if he doesn't care much either way," she said.

Her tea was untouched on the low table before her. She looked cold and small as she sat there, her arms close to her body, her hands on her knees. He went to the closet in the hall, and returned with a shawl. He placed it around her shoulders and kissed her hair.

She did not move.

He sat down again. He tried to recall Mrs. Flicek's bloated belly and obese thighs. The image would not come.

"He's too preoccupied," she went on. "If only it made him happy! But it doesn't. And I keep asking myself, is it my fault? I've been a good wife. I think I have. I loved him. I loved him from the moment I laid eyes on him, a frightened little boy running away. And I sit here, day after day, watching my love die off like a diseased plant, leaf after leaf."

"Kitty," he said hoarsely, "Kitty . . ."

"I think if the book gets printed, things may become better. As they are now — he must have something to prove to himself that he can be successful. . . ."

"Don't you ever think of yourself?"

"But I do! All the time. . . ."

"I hope you'll tell me when you reach a conclusion," he said with some bitterness, and stood up.

"Are you going?"

"Yes."

She rose, her face warped. "You must not punish me, too," she said. "I've taken about all I can."

Then she was clinging to him, her hands clutching his shoulders, her body fleeing to his. "Don't punish me, don't punish me!" she whispered. Her lips were on his, harsh, searing.

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Karel undertook his trip to Prague in a rush resembling flight, although he knew that escape was not possible. He could not avert what was bound to happen. The fire, smoldering for so long, had broken through. He felt it consume the inhibitions, the moral precepts, the family considerations, the regard for Thomas's well-being. He rationalized that Kitty's marriage was on the rocks and would have been on the rocks with or without him; he protested that it was better to operate than to let a cancer grow and destroy more and more of the healthy tissue; he argued that Thomas himself had brought the matter to a head by his infatuation with Vlasta; he insisted that the happiness of two persons outweighed charity for one; he generalized that at a time when so much of the old world was crumbling, the old codes were losing their meaning, too. . . . He realized that he was trying to get Thomas's essay printed not only for the possible value of the book, but also in order to have a crutch handy for Thomas, and an extenuating circumstance for himself.

His personal motive made his advocacy of the Essay subjective and weaker than it should have been; and Novak, having a drink with him and Professor Stanek at the former Nobles' Club, noticed the lack of conviction in Karel's words.

"I'd like to help you," Novak said slowly. "But you must think of our position. Our Party owns or influences certain publishing houses. If they accept a book, we must back it, and it must be the kind of book which will create the maximum effect desired by us. But you, yourself, admit that in many aspects your brother's essay is anything but Marxist."

He turned questioningly to the Professor, who sat in a deep chair, sucking at a cigarette that had gone out. Stanek said nothing.

Uncomfortably, Karel viewed the Ministerial Councilor's armless sleeve. Back in the days of Buchenwald, Novak had seemed a much more broad-minded fellow with much less rigidity, although life then was certainly more precarious than now.

"You're still sore about the election and that statement of Thomas's," said Karel. "Can't you be big about it?"

"I wasn't thinking of the use Dolezhal's gang made of your brother's blurb on freedom." Novak frowned. "Though maybe I should; maybe we shouldn't forget and forgive so easily what happened only in 1946. But let's assume that Thomas Benda was not wholly responsible and to blame for that. The main fact still remains —

"The main fact is," Karel broke in angrily, "Barsiny of Humanita, and this means Dolezhal's Party, turned the Essay down. Now why would they refuse to publish the book of a man they built up on the basis of his past reputation? Prominent author, Spokesman of Czechoslovakia — they used it all. . . . So there is something in the book they don't like, and I'll

tell you what it is. Thomas demolishes the intellectual trappings of their setup. He may not be on our side — granted. But he definitely is not on theirs!"

Stanek had finally disposed of his dead cigarette. Tugging at the black ribbon of his pince-nez, he said, "What do we want? We want people to think. Much of our literature is ineffectual because it supplies rules, formulas, programs — all correct, naturally; but it fails to provoke the reader into thinking for himself, into arriving by himself at the correct rules, formulas, programs. It's pretty much like teaching: Don't make your student learn by rote; get him to ask *Why?* — help him to find the answer, but don't give it to him. If Thomas Bendz's essay will make people ask questions and think, I'm for it. Besides, I feel we are sufficiently sure of ourselves and grown-up enough to be more liberal than anyone else — don't you think so?"

"I guess I'm around Dolezhal too much," Novak said ruefully. "I can't afford to be liberal with him, unless I want to cut my throat and the throat of a good many others." He raised his arm and cordially laid his hand on Karel's shoulder. "If you could spend one day in my shoes, you'd understand me better. Our life in concentration camp was relatively simple — we merely had to survive. Forgive me if I seemed dogmatic."

Karel wished he were able to be on the same level of honesty as these two men. "What will you do with the Essay?" he asked uncomfortably.

"Read it," said Novak.

Stanek brushed some dandruff off his collar and said good-humoredly: "You know, I did discuss one or two of the problems of his book with Thomas, when he was writing it. I'm very eager to see how he handled them. I should have had more time for him. . . . How's his wife?"

"All right," said Karel.

"There's a fine woman!" Stanek said appreciatively. "Devoted, earthy, good to look at, not one of those spindly bluestockings. Did you ever notice, Novak, that writers almost invariably have attractive wives, while government officials get stuck with harpies?"

"I'm a bachelor," mentioned Novak.

"And Joseph, your other brother?" Stanek went on. "I see him sometimes, on the floor of the Assembly or in the lobbies. A worried man he is, Karel, a sick fruit in a healthy shell. . . ." He pointed his pince-nez at Karel's chest. "I want to read the Essay, too. And then we'll give it to Vaclav Villner — he's the chief editor now at People's Books, isn't he, Novak?"

"Yes. I know him."

"Well, would you talk to him about it?" said Stanek.

"If you want me to. . . ." Novak made a wry face. "But Villner is even more of a doctrinaire than I. Reliable, but rather one-sided."

"That's fine!" Stanek laughed reedily. "Then he's in for a shock!"

He picked up the manuscript and scanned the first few pages. Karel watched Stanek's expression as he read. Karel felt unhappy and out of his depth. Here, they talked in large terms, of the workings of government, of the minds of people, of power, and of what to do with it — but not of themselves. His relationship to the Essay was such an intimate one, and he couldn't see how threads which began in Kitty's clean little house on St. Nepomuk might reach into this maze of personalities and issues and movements, without getting lost and torn. And if he failed in what he had started, Thomas wouldn't be the only one to be affected.

Stanek slapped the back of his thin hand against the pages. "He's gifted, that boy! I taught him. If I could have taught him more! If I could teach him now! . . . But he will learn!"

"I hope so," said Karel, with a sinking feeling in his heart.

"In his way, he's a genius," Stanek resumed. "Genius is a very precious grain. We must treat it tenderly to bring it to fruition, so that some of its riches can spill over to all of the people."

He closed the volume and saw Karel's worried face. For a moment, he blinked thoughtfully. He had wanted to be kind, he had wanted to show Karel that he understood some of Thomas's handicaps. But matters between the Benda brothers seemed to be more complicated than a surface view revealed. So he switched to what he thought was a less touchy subject and said, "I hear your brother Joseph resigned as National Administrator of the Benda Works —"

"Yes, he did," confirmed Karel.

"Already?" Novak asked sharply, and his sudden forward motion brought his empty sleeve flapping out of its pocket. But his voice returned quickly enough to its normal tone as he said, "These District National Committees take their time reporting to us!"

"Heard it in the Assembly," said Stanek.

Novak's *Already?* had startled Karel. "Did you know in advance that Joseph would resign?" he said, disturbed.

Novak was evasive. "I never thought very much of the idea that a former owner should administer his old property for the people. And I never made a secret of my opinion, to the Minister or anybody else. Tell me — when did it happen?"

"Monday a week ago."

"All of a sudden?"

"Yes."

"No struggle? No compulsion? Nothing?"

Karel shook his head. "That's what's been bothering me, too. Of course, there was the fire at the Hammer Works, at Christmas. . . ."

"Yes," said Novak, "that's been in the papers." He tucked his sleeve back into his pocket and was silent for a moment.

"And then," Karel went on, "there was the workers' meeting in which the men got violent against Joseph — but that was stopped. And then I went to him and told him to resign. He refused point-blank."

"So the resignation was a complete about-face?" said Novak.

Stanek asked, "Well, why shouldn't he resign?"

"The question is, why *did* he?" said Novak. "Who's taken his place?"

"Frantishek Kravat."

"Why should a close pal of Dolezhal's hand over such a position to us, unless he wants to create a certain impression?" Novak failed to make clear whether the *he* referred to Dolezhal or to Joseph.

"What impression?" said Stanek.

"That they are weak, that they're willing to co-operate with us, that we can count on concessions —"

"Well, they *are* weak!" Stanek put in. "They'll have to give in on the nationalization measure, and they know it."

A small light had cropped up in the back of Novak's eyes, and his fingers were awkward as he tried his trick of lighting a match with his one hand. "What's your brother really like, Karel?" he said.

Karel hesitated. "What do you want to know?" The horrible suspicion arose in him that unless he told something to help them against Joseph, they would do nothing for Thomas — for Thomas, for Kitty, for himself. . . . "I haven't been close to Joseph since I came back from camp."

"Did he give you any reason for his resignation?" asked Novak.

"No."

"Could you take a guess?"

"What's the use of guessing?"

"The Benda Works were very much part of his life, weren't they?"

Karel considered this. If he said Yes, they would believe the resignation was a sham, part of a plot, local or national, as they had suspected Joseph of having some part in the fire at the Hammer Works. . . . They could be right, they could be wrong. . . . He was sick at the thought of their wanting him to put his finger on Joseph. Did he have to betray both of his brothers? . . . If he said No, if he told them that old Peter Benda had pushed Joseph into the business, that Joseph hankered after a different life, an opportunity to do more creative work — then the resignation might appear logical, an act long delayed from which no dangerous conclusions could be drawn. And perhaps it was close enough to the truth. But suppose there *was* a plot? Suppose that Joseph's easy surrender of his last tenuous foothold in the Works indicated an ambition that reached far beyond any National Administratorship? How ruthless had Joseph become?

Karel felt Novak's eyes seeking him out; he saw Stanek shove back his cuffs. "Joseph never wanted the Works," he said tonelessly. "He was forced by our father to take them over. Joseph was the oldest, you see, and he had to do it."

"I see," said Novak. He made no further comment, and Karel wondered whether Novak's reserve was a sign of disappointment or not. Novak reached for a cigarette.

Karel didn't want him to repeat the painful procedure of lighting his own match, and offered him a light.

Novak did not seem to see it. "You know what your information involves, Karel, don't you?"

"No, I don't!" Karel said sharply. "And unless you stop talking in riddles and tell me openly —"

Novak dropped the cigarette, unlit. "I wish I could tell you," he said impatiently. "I wish there were enough to tell!"

Stanek shook his head and smiled, "Help the student to find the answer. You're not being a good teacher, Novak!"

"And I'm not a student!" The match had burned down to Karel's finger tips and he threw it away.

"My dear Karel," said Stanek, "as a doctor, you must be something of a psychologist. You must know that a contradiction between a man's character and his actions cannot exist. Are you sure that you did not adjust your brother's character to his actions? Because if you did . . ."

"Yes — if I did?"

"The time for laughing off a kettle of goulash soup is past." Stanek had ceased being a genial old man with funny habits. "We're back where we were when I came to your house with a wounded man. You've got to make up your mind!"

"Joseph never wanted the Works," Karel restated, each word an effort. "That's the holy truth. But the moment he took them over, he changed. The life he wanted to lead had been blocked, and he could never go back to it. He had married, he had gotten into the rut of the industry. So the life he had to lead became his obsession. He had been punished by our father, and he turned the punishment into a compensation."

"Go on!" demanded Novak, as if digging spurs into him.

"The Benda Works became his whipping post, and he, himself, was lashed to it. He had to make a success of the Works; that was the only meaning left to his life. And then they were taken away by Herr Aloysius Hammer of Martinice. Joseph fought a war, and he got them back. But hardly had he built them up again, when they were nationalized."

He stopped. He had dissected his brother and thrown the cadaver on the table for the whole world to see. It was worse than murder.

"Tragic, isn't it?" said Stanek. "But Blaha's death was tragic, too."

Karel buried his face in his hands. He wanted to ask questions, big questions — his time and his country and his people were breaking up, and something new was emerging, like Mrs. Flicek's baby which had finally been born. But why did he have to attend, and be torn to pieces in the struggle?

He didn't ask, because there could be no answer; because a man lives in his time, and that's the only life he has.

He heard Novak say something. He looked up.

"I said I was glad you told us the story." There was compassion in Novak's voice. "I've known part of it since the time Joseph came to the Ministry to plead for full title to the Works. I didn't know quite how deep it went. . . ."

Because a man lives in his time — it went through Karel's mind — and chooses his stand, and must try to form the world in his image.

"Is it all right if I take the afternoon train back to Rodnik?" he said after a while. "I believe we've settled everything."

"I think we have," said Stanek, picking up the manuscript. "I'll read this overnight, and we'll see some results on it."

Novak merely nodded. He thought of the call he would have to put through to the Security Section of the Ministry of Interior; and he thought of his arm, which Karel had had to cut off; and he thought that, if he could help it, there would never again be a fascist concentration camp.

CHAPTER TEN

Any class striving for power must justify its aspirations. It cannot base its struggle on bread-and-butter issues alone; it must acquire an ideology. It must speak and act in the name of its ideals. In the early days of its career, while the battle for power is still undecided, it holds high its shield and goes out on its mission with the zeal of the pure; but the sons and grandsons soon learn that the ideals of their revolutionary fathers can become an embarrassment. And at the end of its time, when it is faced by a new class demanding admission, its decadent and frightened heirs will find the shield too heavy and will secretly curse the great words written on it.

The feudal lords conquered their world in the sign of Christianity; but ultimately, the Christian principles sounded hollow from the lips of the barons who mouthed them to hold down their serfs. The bourgeoisie

called for freedom and equality of man; but today, it has to scrap its own words whenever and wherever they are put to test.

Viewed objectively, neither love for thy fellow man, which is Christianity, nor freedom and equality are ideas to be discarded lightly. It took centuries to create them, and they are worth more than an occasional Sunday sermon.

The gulf between what we believe in, objectively, and what we do about it, subjectively, is deep and menacing. It invites political suicide on the part of the class which does not live up to its original premises. It swallows integrity. It provokes moral — and sometimes physical — suicide of the individual who is unable to overcome the conflict between what he should do and what he does do.

In his book *Suicide as a Phenomenon of Modern Civilization*, Thomas G. Masaryk touches on this when he writes: "It may be said that modern man takes upon his own shoulders the whole guilt of life, he reproaches himself; but it may also be said that his suicide is, as it were, a delirium of subjectivity, an annihilation of objectivity, as though he were destroying the object that irritated him."

But wherein are we guilty? Who has placed this terrible burden on us? Is self-destruction the only means of destroying the objective circumstances which have created the insoluble conflict? If we have to choose between maintaining the rule of a class and upholding the ideals it proclaimed, can there be any question of where the decision must lie?

Perhaps I am unrealistic. Perhaps one cannot order a whole class, hypocritical, played-out, and rotten though it may be, to resign and step off the stage of history. Nor does a whole class commit physical suicide; it will try to live on, a horrible caricature of its own youthful image; it will still celebrate the revolutions which brought it to power, but it will have perverted their meaning. . . .

From THOMAS BENDA: *Essay on Freedom*

JOSEPH'S CABLE to Elinor had found her half-prepared for a quick junket to Prague. It had come on top of a number of disquieting reports, some from diplomatic sources in Washington and New York, others from Czechoslovakia — from small-time newspapermen, professional coffeehouse sitters, and other gossip mongers who earned their American food packages by supplying Elinor Simpson with what she referred to as "inside information."

And it coincided with another, personal development.

Elinor was getting stale. She had hung on to her vitality as well or better than the next person; she had refused to acknowledge the years. But one morning realization was there, with the suddenness of catastrophe. Her thinking, always so secure, so conscious of will and purpose, was becoming

fuzzy and tinged by a sadness which disgusted her and which she could not overcome.

She had to accept the fact that her columns were turning out gabby, diffused, shrewish, complaining, hysterical. The irony, the superiority, the old mastery were gone. She tried to imitate the form and style she herself had developed; but cancellations from editors kept coming in to the feature service which syndicated her articles to American newspapers throughout the country.

She thought of going to a psychoanalyst; but she knew it would take two or three years before a doctor could make her adjust to what had happened, and even the best of the Freudians could not undo the ravages of time.

She thought of her life as it had been, and tried to re-evaluate it. She picked out the men who, she believed, had had meaning in it. She saw some of them over cocktails, others at dinner, others, again, at night in her home. They were like ghosts. There was only one who remained alive to her, because he was not around to disprove her sentiments: Thomas Benda.

If only something would come along to give new content to her work and her life! And there it was — Joseph's cable, indicating at least the possibility that the great and exciting days of Munich might repeat themselves — days when her every dispatch, her every analysis, had been gobbled up by millions of readers, when every happening had confirmed her prophecies, when life had been full.

Elinor Simpson needed a crisis in Czechoslovakia, and she set out to find it.

Her hostess gown hid her girdle and bulges. She lay on the settee in her suite at the Alcron, while Joseph paced up and down, gesticulating.

"The crisis is unavoidable!" he was saying. "It is a question of initiative. Until now, *they* have had it, always. They have made demands, and we have made concessions; but we've reached the point where any further concession is suicidal." He stopped pacing. "We must regain the initiative! And we're prepared, we're organized. We're prepared to defend this democracy of ours, if necessary, with our lives."

She put down her recently acquired long black-and-gold holder through which she had been smoking, and reached for a delicate antique pillbox that stood on the table next to her. She swallowed a pill, made a clucking sound with her tongue, and asked, "What about the Russians?"

"Forget about the Russians! The Russians have their own problems, and they're not going to march in here, because if they did, it would mean war, and they can't afford it."

Her chin sagged. "In America — " she said.

"Yes, I know, in America! For America, you can write about the Russians. But we're here, quite close to them. Do you think Dolezhal would dare make a move if there were any chance of the Red Army's interfering? Thank God, we have to deal only with our own workers, and I think we can manage that."

I'm talking too much, he thought. Why am I talking so much?

"A crisis . . ." she said, "a crisis has to be started. It doesn't come by itself."

"It will come!" he said still confidently, but with more deliberation. "This Assembly has only a few more months to go, and it's deadlocked over the Constitution. Time works against them!" After a pause, he added, "But if they don't move, we will. Nothing is worse than to be ready for battle, and dally."

He sat down, facing her. Her fatigue depressed him. She had always struck him as the epitome of Western womanhood — perennial, well-groomed, cultivated, self-reliant. He thought that he, too, must have aged and become tired and dispirited.

"All right, all right," she said; "until now, everything sounds fine. But concretely, what are you going to do?"

It was difficult to explain. He had told Dolezhal that Elinor Simpson was coming from America and should receive some sort of briefing, if her abilities and her influence were to be used. But Dolezhal had given him little to go by; Dolezhal was a careful man; and he, himself, knew only his end of the plan and, in the most general terms, its objective.

"We're organized, we're prepared," he said. He had said that before. "We have the widest backing — farmers, tradespeople, students, part of the workers, Slovaks, Catholics. We have our key men in the police, generals in the Army. I, myself —" He broke off, but then decided to go on. It was necessary to impress Elinor with the thoroughness of the preparations. "I, myself, have had a small part in this. Of course, there won't be any open fighting, any bloodshed. That won't be needed."

"No?" she said. "How can you tell?"

"Once the Communists see they're through — well, it will be as in France, in Italy. They're through and they're out of the government and that's what we want. We'll have a new kind of government, at least as a stopgap measure — a government of civil servants, of specialists in their fields, men above reproach, men not identified with any party. They'll do away with the excesses of the past years, and it won't take long till the country is back on a safe and sane and orderly and democratic basis. So you see, it won't be a *Putsch* or anything of that sort; it'll be a — a recovery of our national reason. . . ."

"It doesn't sound bad to me —" Her spongy skin seemed to have re-

gained some of its elasticity. "In fact, it sounds damned good! I've always liked you Czechs; you're a sensible people. I hate extremists! Though I shouldn't, because they make good copy. . . ." She laughed, but grew immediately serious. "You're sure you can carry it through?"

Joseph was beginning to relax. A second visit to Duchinsky had found the General more amenable. A third would no doubt bring a firm commitment; and now his business with Elinor was proceeding at a good, smooth pace.

"Nothing is foolproof," he smiled. "But I think we'll be able to carry it through." His large hands were clasped on his lap like a peasant's hands after a day's work; he felt his own strength and the strength of the machine of which he was a cog. "I have a lot at stake, you know, Elinor—I should hardly have risked it if I didn't believe we can win. . . ." And he added suddenly, with a loud laugh, "And if it does go wrong—my God, you can always get me a visa to the States, can't you?"

She sat up straight. Her eyes were angry and a little fearful, and her voice had lost all superciliousness. "Of course I can. But you won't need it, you said!"

"I won't. No. Thank you."

Joseph moved his hands. They were no longer a symbol of strength, but awkward appendages. This had not been the time for asking for this kind of thing.

"You're a sensible people," she said. "But that's your weakness, too. If blood has to be shed, for Christ's sake, don't be afraid of it: shed it!"

"Yes, Elinor," he said meekly.

"I'd hate to have to run to the Embassy for favors just because you people don't know what you're up against!"

"But we do know!" he assured her.

"I hope you do," she grumbled. "Now, I'm willing to help you. Nobody, not even in America, likes to see people roughed up. But that's exactly what you may have to do. So I'll angle my stuff to the necessity of it. And that new specialists' government of yours—they'll need a loan or something after you take over, because it's always nice if somebody fresh in power can hand out a giftie. So when the time comes, I'll write about that, too."

"That'll be very important," he said, suppressing his anger at his own fear and at the way in which she had taken advantage of it.

"But have you ever thought that I write in English? That what I have to say will be read across the ocean, but not here where it's most needed? What have you done to prepare your own public for the changes you want to bring about?"

It was not his department; he had no idea what, if anything, Dolezhal had arranged. "We have our press," he defended himself. "It has been given directives, naturally —"

"You're a sensible people," she said a third time, and he became sick and tired of having to hear it. "Sensible — but you've got to learn. Where's the man through whom you channel your ideas, who personalizes the issue, who speaks up and to whom the public can turn for guidance? Where's your spokesman?"

Joseph was silent. He knew nothing about the finer points of this American publicity approach, and the word "spokesman" conjured up disagreeable associations.

"What about Thomas?" she asked. "Why is he not being used? If you go all-out after a target, you use everything and everybody you've got!"

He sighed, "Thomas is playing school!" And as he saw her puzzled frown, he elaborated: "I had Petra with me in Prague, at a boarding school. It didn't work out. Now she's back in Rodnik, and Thomas is teaching her. He's very good at it, too, very conscientious, sticks to it every day except Sunday."

Her frown deepened. "Spending his time with a kid Petra's age — what kind of life is that for him?"

Joseph shrugged knowingly. "He seems to like it. Of course, there's Vlasta — she instructs in mathematics and the languages; Thomas reserved history and philosophy and literature to himself."

"Vlasta . . ." she said. "Pretty? Young?"

"Oh, quite. . . ." Not that he'd ever had the time to do anything about it. He hesitated. Her show of amused interest wasn't coming off too well. Yet he couldn't afford to arouse her hostility. "Thomas had to find something to occupy himself," he said placatingly.

"He finished writing his essay?"

"Yes," grunted Joseph. "But Barsiny turned it down. An impossible piece — wild, radical, not at all what you and I hoped it would be. It seems Thomas went completely overboard. The kindest thing you can say about him is that he picked his own corner, and he picked it where no one else wants to stay, and now he's crawled into it."

"And whose fault is that?" she retorted. "Was he ever a man to be left to his own devices, in his work, or in his life? Where were you?"

The accusation sat badly on Joseph. His broad face grew tight, and he said caustically, "As far as I've been informed, he told you to go to hell, too." Then he remembered that it wasn't she who needed him, and continued, "Even Barsiny said —"

"I know everything Barsiny said. He's coming in a little while, and I

want you to be here when he arrives. And Barsiny *will* print the Essay — who does he think he is, bucking you and Dolezhal?"

She knocked her gold-and-black holder against the knuckles of her hand and belligerently stared through Joseph. Then her bloodshot eyes began to ache. She'd have to go to Rodnik. She'd have to clear up the mess into which Thomas had got himself — with the Essay, with his infantile retreat from the world, with this Vlasta. She would have gone, anyway, but this made it imperative that she go soon. She closed her eyes.

Joseph sat on the edge of his chair, not daring to move, and intensely conscious of the ludicrousness of his situation.

Barsiny appeared, oozing the thick air of a man who has only the best intentions and who can't help it if they've been spoiled. He had in his pockets the opinions of his readers and a sheaf of quotes from the Essay, and he treated Elinor and Joseph to a strategic selection of Thomas's views, each one of them sufficient to outrage the sensibilities of his listeners.

"Now, *can* you publish a book of this kind?" was his refrain. "I don't know what got into Thomas Benda — all this is diametrically opposed to the wonderful statement he gave us when you were here the last time, madame."

He showed his yellow teeth in what was intended as a smile, and spread his hands in apology.

Elinor glanced castigatingly at Joseph. But he didn't notice it; he was absorbed by the reading and his own dismal thoughts. What his brother had written was vastly more reprehensible than the half-cocked ideas of an offsider which were to be expected from a Thomas unsupervised — it was a condemnation of his own stand, his own work, his own struggle; and coming at this juncture, it hit him with peculiar force.

He felt defrauded and maligned. Why had he worked so hard to hang on to the Benda Works and to build up Vesely's, why was he now up to his neck in an action so precipitous that his nerves twitched and his brain recoiled from thinking it through to the end — if not to enable Thomas to sit at his desk with an income assured, and to create the great literature a man of his gifts should write? Yes, Thomas had refused himself before; his desertion after the fire at Hammer was unforgivable. But an artist had no place in dirty day-by-day business, and you couldn't very well demand of Thomas that he defend the retention of the Sudeten-Germans against which he had screamed.

Now, however, as Barsiny's fatty voice laid bare the full extent of Thomas's heresies, as it became clear to Joseph that the boy had not just grown away from him, but had turned traitor to the family, to religion, to all the things that were sacred and not to be doubted, to the very freedom

the book was supposed to defend — there was only a gray, dull sense of loss, and the foreboding of something evil. Thomas might speak for no one but himself, yet he was a barometer for the mood of the times and the people.

Elinor, of course, couldn't see it. All she thought of was that her poor little Thomas had been left motherless and fatherless and so had stumbled off the safe road.

"You would publish the Essay, though," she was saying to Barsiny, "if we took out all those objectionable quips and made it a decent book?"

Joseph settled back and watched Barsiny squirm. From the moment the publisher had entered, making loud, cordial noises and at the same time displaying his subservience to the famous Elinor Simpson and the influential Deputy, Joseph had disliked him, and his dislike had swelled as he noticed the undertone of glee with which Barsiny had read the quotes from the "Essay on Freedom." As far as Joseph was concerned, he no longer cared whether Thomas was ever again published anywhere. But it pepped him up to hear Elinor lay down the law to Barsiny, and to see someone else being pushed against the wall, for a change.

Barsiny was scratching his wheat-colored pate. "It will be impossible, madame!" His eye caught Elinor collecting breath for a good, long tirade, and he said quickly, "I mean, you know Mr Thomas Benda! He has a mind of his own! Don't you think I have tried? An author of such reputation! I didn't like to lose his book. He will never agree, we will never convince him —"

"I will convince him," said Elinor.

Barsiny stopped scratching. He remembered how she had pulled the advance statement out of Thomas, and he began to feel seriously troubled.

"You worry about sticking to your contract," Elinor went on coolly, "and about speedy publication. I worry about Thomas Benda."

Barsiny's eyes shifted. He couldn't tell the woman, especially not in the presence of Deputy Benda, that he wanted to wash his hands of the whole matter, and that if she cut out the half of the book disturbing to her, a second half would remain which would disturb a lot of other people he had no intention of antagonizing.

"Don't you think, Joseph," she asked, "that the book, properly rewritten, would be of great help in the coming days?"

"Yes," said Joseph, "I'm sure of that."

"Well, Dr. Barsiny?"

Barsiny was smiling again. He had begun to add up time: The weeks and months it would take to rewrite and reorganize the manuscript, if Thomas should prove to be unprincipled enough to do it — the slow process of editorial preparation — the problem of typesetting, printing,

binding—the distribution to the stores. Who knew what the situation would be after all that was done? Who knew how many fresh reasons could be found for stopping publication, if that was desirable?

“If you can furnish an acceptable manuscript, madame, we’d be only too happy —”

“Thank you, Dr. Barsiny. And may I say you acted wisely in preventing Thomas Benda from rushing into this — this —”

“Adventure?” suggested the publisher.

“Yes, adventure. I’m glad there was at least one man,” she went on pointedly, “who cared enough to look after Thomas’s interests.”

“My authors’ interests,” said Barsiny, “are my own, too.”

“Obviously,” she said.

On that note, the publisher took speedy leave. After he had gone, she ordered drinks for herself and Joseph, and raising her glass, announced, “That’s how simple it is. Here’s to our Spokesman!”

Then she took another pill.

The maid at Joseph’s house, remembering Elinor, took her in and led her to a locked door. The maid knocked once, then a second time, and finally there were shuffling steps from the bolted side and a voice which Elinor was unable to recognize.

The maid said something about the American lady’s having come back to Rodnik. The voice gave an order through the closed door, and the maid moved off shaking her head and mumbling to herself.

Elinor, left alone, waited in the hallway. She could make nothing of the situation, and she grew impatient. But before she had fully resolved to investigate the house by herself—and to find Thomas—Lida, her hair straggly, her face smudged, her eyes shrewdly winking, opened the door. “In here!” she said anxiously. “Come in here!”

The room, which Elinor had never seen before, was none too large; it probably had served as one of the boys’ rooms in Peter Benda’s time. Now it was bare of furniture, except for an old chair and a large, well-worn table that showed many recent scratches. All along the walls stood suitcases and crates, some empty, some half-filled with packages and wood shavings and strips of newspaper, some already nailed closed or securely locked. The shade over the single window was drawn; a bare electric bulb suspended from the center of the ceiling cast a thin, sharp light which made the straight lines of the boxes and suitcases and trunks create angular, abstractionist shadows; the air was heavy and saturated with the musty smell of a storage attic.

The room and its disheveled occupant gave Elinor an eerie sensation, as if on crossing the threshold she had entered a world of changelings and

spooks. And this wasn't the Lida she had known — the immensely efficient, clever, hard manager of a factory and a big household!

"I'm packing!" said Lida, swinging herself on the table and letting her legs hang. "You can help me if you like."

She had torn her stocking on a nail or on the rough corner of a crate, and the wide run was like a gash on her leg.

"I'm about half-through. It's a lot of work. First you have to think of what you want to take along, then you have to get it together so that no one notices, and then it must be packed for a long trip. You never can tell how baggage is smashed around. It used to be that they were careful on the railways, and the trucking companies were reliable — but now? And you can't even take out insurance. It's all nationalized, and they'd report everything to the police."

"When are you leaving?" asked Elinor in the soft tone in which you question the mad.

"I don't know. But it will be soon. There will be a great change and they'll be knocking at our door, and all I can tell you is that we'd better be gone by that time!"

"Does Joseph know about it?"

"Does he?" For a moment Lida's voice, which had sounded almost senile, was full and rang with the scorn she had used so effectively in the past. "Joseph knows nothing. Tomorrow, he says, we'll get back the Benda Works, and the Hammer Works, everything; but to get them back, we must first hand them to the rabble. I ask you, Elinor, is there rhyme or reason in that? Those whom God wishes to destroy, he first deprives of their senses. . . . Enough of this chitchat. Help me pull this forward!" She jumped off the table and began to tug at a large, metal-enforced trunk. "This will hold quite a bit," she explained.

"It will, no doubt," said Elinor, frightened. And since it was better to humor such people, she pretended to help Lida, grunting and groaning and sweating in her elegant fur coat.

Then she was outside the door. She heard Lida click back the lock. She felt the weakness in her calves and the pounding of her heart. What had come over the Bendas? If Lida — the rational, practical Lida — could lose that much of her bearings, how much of Joseph's brave words could be trusted? And hadn't he, too, hinted at flight when he inquired about an American visa? Was this what she'd flown across the ocean for — a story on disintegration and breakdown and defeat?

Elinor refused to accept it. Too great a part of herself was tied up with this family, and with this nice, clean, cultivated little outpost of the democratic way of life, for her to treat what she saw as just another news story.

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She found Thomas in the other wing of the house.

It really was a schoolroom, with a blackboard, a desk for the teacher, a bench for Petra, a map strung up at the wall, and some extra chairs, one of which was occupied by a young woman who, she realized, must be Vlasta.

If Thomas was surprised, he didn't show it. He didn't rise. He pressed his finger against his mouth and motioned for her to take the empty chair next to him.

"We're having a very interesting discussion on Hegel," he whispered and, looking at his wrist watch, "there'll be another twenty minutes of it, then the classes are over for today. . . . No, Petra, you can say hello to Elinor when we're through."

The Vlasta person was in the middle of some apparently deep contribution to the lecture. Elinor saw that her entry into the room had no effect on the girl beyond a slight smile which might just as well pertain to what she was arguing. Petra's attention had returned to her teacher, and she was hanging on Vlasta's lips.

"Now come on, Thomas!" Elinor said angrily. "Break it up and let's get out of here. It's nearly two years since I've seen you — I've traveled around half the globe — I have to talk to you!"

He was not looking at her. His eyes seemed to caress Vlasta's face even as he inclined his head to answer. "You know, this Hegel!" he said *sotto voce*. "He's open to so many interpretations! I sometimes think he intentionally wrote double talk."

After that, he took up the lecture, throwing the ball as often as he could to Petra, and pausing considerably whenever he felt Vlasta wanted to air her views on the dialectics of Professor Hegel. Since the whole discussion was conducted in Czech, Elinor could do nothing but sit back and observe, and digest her encounter with Lida, and try to fight down her rage over Thomas's behavior.

There was a triangle whose apex was this Vlasta girl. The girl was not, as she had assumed when Joseph brought up the name, only another Kitty, one of those broad-hipped young Czech females who are pleasant to sleep with and cuddly and loyal and never any problem. That type would have been easy to handle; Vlasta was different, and yet there was about her something familiar — perhaps it was the way she held her head, perhaps her hair so closely fitted to her skull.

Elinor scrutinized her. She was not yet able to determine what it was; but it would occur to her, given time and any small thing to set off the right train of thought — a motion, an intonation, a casual look.

And she had time; Thomas had made that abundantly clear. Thomas was obviously mooning. It was pitiful to watch. He was showing off and

trying to catch Vlasta's eye; from his facial expressions and gestures Elinor could see that he was being witty; there was a boyish eagerness about him whenever Vlasta deigned to say a few words; and when he garnered one of her rare approving nods, he settled back in his chair to conjecture happily on his good fortune. Lida, at least, was driven by a fear which was probably justifiable — but this drooling idiocy! It was the counterpart to the stupidities he had written into his book, and everything in Elinor itched to get her hands on both the author and his work and to set them straight.

Elinor's eyes wandered along the other side of the triangle, from the apex to Petra. Petra was apparently unaware of Thomas's antics; or she was so accustomed to them that she was no longer affected. Petra seemed inattentive at times. Elinor wished her Czech were not limited to ordering a small light beer at the bar of the Alcron or inquiring after the nearest ladies' room; words gave a person away, and she was almost sure that Petra was directing her answers not toward Thomas, but toward Vlasta. Damn it, that side of the triangle was by far the more interesting! Every so often the long lashes that veiled Vlasta's eyes would lift, and from under them a half-hidden glance would focus on the pretty young thing pretending to study Hegel. And the pretty young thing with her soft brown curls and her up-tilted nose and her smooth cheeks would receive the glance and stir slightly and moisten her red lips and bend her head deeper over her text.

Yes — that was it. Why hadn't she noticed it right away? Hegel — oh you holy innocence!

And was Thomas blind? Didn't he see what those set shoulders, those large hands, that stern mouth — this whole composite of oblique, scurrilous beauty — what all this meant? Wasn't there anyone in this inert little town with eyes in his head and enough moral gumption to run this she-wolf to the devil?

She looked at Thomas, who was prattling on unconcernedly. Her course of action was clear. She was not predatory, she told herself. She would have left Thomas to his own devices if only some good would result from them. As it was, erasing this unnatural triangle and saving his unsuspecting hide for something healthier were a necessity.

Thomas finally closed his books and put away his notes. Petra came up to shake Elinor's hand and to tell her how glad she was to see her; and all the while she burned to be off and to take Vlasta up to her own room so as to describe Elinor's morning face caked in white plaster, Elinor's lacy robe, and the toenail polish.

Thomas took Vlasta by the hand and presented her. "This is Vlasta Rehan," he said dotingly. "Vlasta, I should like you to meet a famous American writer, Elinor Simpson."

"My English is very poor," Vlasta smiled politely. "You speak German, perhaps?"

"Your English will do," stated Elinor, and thought, I wonder if she knows that I know. She certainly isn't letting on. "You like it here?"

"Mr. Thomas Benda is very kind to me," said Vlasta. Thomas's face spread with pleasure.

"You seem to like Petra very much, too."

Vlasta's brows questioned. "Naturally. A teacher must like her student, or she cannot teach well."

"I'm happy you feel *that* way," Elinor said emphatically. "I like Petra, too; I like all the Bendas. They're a very close-knit family. You must have some wonderful qualities to have been accepted by them."

"Thank you," Vlasta nodded curtly. "I shall see you at dinner?"

"I'll be here, too," Thomas said cheerily.

Vlasta spoke to him in Czech.

Elinor asked, "What's she saying?"

"She's telling me I've spent all afternoon here and neglected my own work." He laughed. "She thinks I should go home."

"And will you?"

"I guess so."

Scandalous, thought Elinor, the degree to which she has him under her thumb. And the show of gaiety with which she took Petra's arm and waltzed her out of the door — just two young kids intent on having their fun! She was an accomplished actress, a female Jekyll and Hyde — or, was she actually not aware of her own compulsions? But that was impossible.

"Well, Thomas!" said Elinor, "for an escape from reality, you've found yourself a lovely little spot. What are you going to do next — apply for a job at the Rodnik High School?"

He sat down behind the teacher's desk and snapped the brass cover of the inkwell open and closed, open and closed. Then he said, "It might not be a bad idea, at that."

"You don't seem very excited at seeing me. Have I changed?"

She was a little apprehensive of his answer, but she knew that the pills were working in her. She pushed up her face so that the curve from her chin down her throat would lose its indentations.

"To me, you're always the same," he said, not looking up. "And I *am* excited, though I may not show it. You've come at a very critical time of my life. How did Vlasta impress you?"

"Now listen! I'll be in Czechoslovakia for a few weeks, maybe a month —"

"A very critical time of my life," he said again. "Didn't I write you what happened to the Essay?"

"You didn't. But I've heard."

"I ought to have a bad conscience," he smiled, "towards you. I didn't write the book you thought I'd write. I tried to tell you so at the time, but you never would believe me."

"I've heard that, too," she said.

"How do you like Vlasta? Isn't she spectacular?"

"How's Kitty?"

He glanced at her, his lips half-open, hurt. "There's nothing between me and Vlasta. This is on an entirely different plane. I suppose neither you nor Kitty would understand. . . ."

"I understand. I understand more than you think I do. I understand because you're part of my life, because, in a certain manner, I've made you what you are."

"You shouldn't tell me that," he said. "Besides, it's nothing to be proud of. Look at me, the great writer, attempting to teach an adolescent about the big ideas that made the world."

"Whom are you kidding? You're not sitting here because you want to teach Petra. But we'll talk about Vlasta later. First—I've spoken to Barsiny."

So she had made him what he was, he thought. Well, she had done her damndest to try. She had interfered, and interfered again, and here she was once more. What was it about him that attracted her impulse for butting in? He was no longer in his formative years, he lived his own life, bad or good, he had written his essay and had declared his independence from her, from everybody—

"Barsiny?" he said. "I hope you didn't exert yourself to change his mind."

"I didn't have to. He changed it himself. He wants to print your essay."

"No!" There was utter amazement in his tone, and a dash of triumph. Then he frowned, "You must have pressured him—you, and perhaps some other people. He was dead-set against it."

"Of course, he insists on some cuts and editorial alterations—"

"I see. . . ."

"Now, give up that Benda muleheadedness! Some of the things you wrote are inexcusable. But on the whole, it's a great and important work, and it must be published."

"When you go back to Prague, tell Barsiny that I won't change a line."

"You want to see it printed, don't you?"

"Certainly!"

"Well, then!"

She was hard and demanding, and she looked it.

"Let's stop beating around the bush, Elinor! I've sold out once; I won't

do it again. I've had my life run by other people, you among them, much too long. Now I'm free. The Essay has helped me. I've had to think about everything vital to myself, to man and his relationship to society and his conscience." He stood up and banged his fist on the desk. "Now I'm free, I tell you, free!"

He was wonderful. A sweet warmth rose from her heart, her head swam a little as she looked up to him, and she felt young.

"I've got my work, I've got my days full, I've got Vlasta! I'm free, I'm happy! Don't you see?" He sat down. Condescendingly, he tapped her hand. "Professor Stanek has read my manuscript and passed it on to Vaclav Villner of People's Books. It looks as if they're going to publish it — and publish it as is!"

Her face had collapsed.

"You saved my life once," he said gently. "I was grateful. I've paid my debt."

"I'll never forget this." Her voice was cracking. "If you come back crawling on your knees — I'll never forget it."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

LIDA stood idle in her packing room, her head cocked as if the words that had been spoken to her somehow still wafted through the dusty air. *What do you gain by saving yourself and your bric-a-brac, if you lose your child?*

Elinor had broken in a second time and made her listen. She had gone on doing her work, but after a while her hands had ceased to move; then had begun the painful process of making space in her crowded mind for a new and upsetting complex of thought.

Lida stepped to the window and cautiously pushed aside the shade. Elinor was just getting into the cab to catch the train back to Prague. *Don't bother to take me to the gate! You've got things to do! Do them!* That had been her farewell. What a woman! What eyes! What intelligence! How quickly Elinor had recognized and put her finger on what she, herself, would not have dreamed of suspecting! Well, Elinor had been all over the world and probably had seen everything disgusting and abnormal there was to see.

With a sigh, Lida let the shade slip back into place. It was a difficult problem. As long as Elinor stomped about, talking loudly, ordering, it had

appeared as logical and as easy as one-two-three. Now Lida was alone, no one to help her. And on the table were still piled hundreds of valuables which had to be cleaned and wrapped and packed — part of the silver; the coin collection of Jaroslav Vesely; the jewelry Peter Benda had given to his wife Anna, old-fashioned designs, but with excellent stones; a hand-carved chess set of the finest ivory; a bundle of bond issues of Skoda in Pilsen, worthless now, but one day, perhaps, they might again sell for the amount printed on their face, or for more.

It was a hard thing to do, it was hard to believe, even of Vlasta, who had been foisted on her by Joseph and Thomas and Karel. Hadn't they noticed it? A pretty face, and the Benda men turned somersaults; but as for seeing what was behind it, that was expecting too much.

She had heard of such women; she wasn't born yesterday. But it was so vicious, so reprehensible, so vile that one didn't think of it, and certainly didn't think of its touching one's own home, one's own child. It was in line with all the other ills cropping up in this time; when they can take away a man's property unpunished, the floodgates are opened and the swill and the muck from the bottom whirl up.

And yet, if you looked at Vlasta, if you watched her move about the house, so quiet and dignified and unapproachable. . . . Lida's face puckered in disgust and in doubt.

But that was just it! A normal woman come to live under your roof would behave normally; she would chat with you and talk about herself and laugh and try to help you in small ways — after all, she was being paid, and paid well! But not Vlasta. She was secretive and kept to herself, she never was really friendly to you, and she warmed up only when Petra was with her. She gave you a strange and puzzling sensation. Lida wrinkled her brows — if I weren't so busy packing, if I had more than a few weeks here or, at best, a month, I shouldn't have needed a woman from America to tell me what's going on under my own nose.

With that, Lida began to cry a little. She sat down at the table and, tears in her eyes, searched for the tiny ring with the spot of pale blue turquoise. She found it and fondled it and reached for a piece of rag to wipe the gold clean. Joseph had given it to Petra on her third or fourth birthday — such a cunning thing, where were the fingers it had fitted? And why had all this been destroyed? Why was she sitting here, on the rubbish heap of her happiness?

She'd never been one to let herself be swept away by her misery. With her, despondence soon turned into a slow, silent rage, and the rage found its outlet in action. She put aside the ring and, locking the room behind her, walked down the corridor.

The large house lay still. Undecided, Lida waited and listened: Nowhere

a voice, from nowhere a footstep. She suddenly felt ill-dressed; her face and hands were dirty with the traces of her work. For days now, she had slaved away at her job, hardly taking time out to eat, rarely changing her clothes. One might think that Petra would have been concerned and once, at least, have shown some feeling about her mother! Petra and Vlasta had had their meals with her, and never so much as a question had been asked. Lida's eyes grew small with hate — the intruder's insidious influence had gone far, indeed!

Slowly, then faster, then almost running, Lida mounted the stairs and rounded the corner to her bedroom. She ripped off her soiled clothes and left them where they fell; she let the water pour into the basin and scrubbed her face till it was red. She washed her hands again and again, she washed off the perspiration in her armpits and dried herself carefully. Then she combed her hair thoroughly and used her fingers in an effort to re-create her long-neglected waves. She put on fresh underwear and with great deliberation picked a dark, severe, high-necked dress. Now she felt differently! She powdered her nose and lipsticked her mouth and dabbed Eau de Cologne at her temples and at the soft skin behind her ears. A last critical look in the mirror — she was ready to tackle anything and to defend herself and her child.

Without knocking, she tore open the door to Petra's room.

Petra jumped up. "What's the matter, Mother? You're not ill?"

"No, thank you. I'm not ill." Lida realized that her tenseness showed on her face. She smiled thinly and, with one look, took in the situation. Vlasta was standing with her back to the window, her hands on the sill; Petra had been sprawling on the crumpled bed; an open book lay on the floor.

"Well, what have you two been doing?"

"Talking!" said Petra. "The weather is keeping us in."

Lida was thinking rapidly. Outwardly, all was in order — just two girls in a room, gabbing away, the adolescent nonsense, probably, that appealed to Petra. Lida's eyes went roving. She tried to find some clue, something on which to hang her suspicions, something which could serve as the starting point for what she must say. There was nothing.

She tried to remember what Elinor had told her. *They're very clever. The obvious ones are no danger. But those who aren't . . . You have to have seen a lot of them before you can identify them at a glance.*

A fine blush colored Vlasta's delicate face. It was the first time she was being checked on. "We were just about to go downstairs to get some tea," she said.

"Oh, were you?" said Lida. "I hope, Miss Rehan, you don't mind my disturbing you like this. . . ." Elinor could be mistaken. Lida controlled

the shudder that wanted to run down her spine. Accusing a woman of such a vice would more than destroy her career, it might destroy her life! But what about Lida's own career, her own life — who'd ever cared about that? She glared at Vlasta. She saw the face carried high, the proud mouth, the silver heart dangling between the breasts; she felt again the strange and puzzling sensation, a kind of spell that went out from the girl and made you want to be kind to her. Yes, she was beautiful, but her very beauty was the proof of her depravity, and the spell she cast was the hall-mark of her evil.

"It was no disturbance at all," said Vlasta, her eyes clouded. She did not like the long silences. Mrs. Benda obviously had come on some errand, something important, some announcement; her appearance was not as sloppy as usual; she had primed herself for whatever it was she had to make known, but was holding back. "What can I do for you, Mrs. Benda? Has anything come up?"

"Yes," Lida said slowly, "a very grave matter." She did not go on. She was a little taken aback by Vlasta's apparent willingness to co-operate; it didn't fit into the picture; a person of this kind ought to be so full of bad conscience, of fear of being found out, that it should show by now. Then she recalled Elinor's warning: *She's a consummate actress. Don't hesitate. Confront her with the truth. They all crack up under it.* Bless Elinor. What settled it was the ease with which the person stood there, leaning against the window sill, as if nothing were happening, as if she didn't know that she was at the point of being unmasked.

"Miss Rehan!"

"Yes?"

"I'm afraid —"

Lida hesitated. She couldn't come out with the blunt truth in front of Petra. A child — one must think of the later years. The hurts of childhood have a habit of coming back to haunt. They come back and have grown like underwater plants, lush, ill-shaped, and stinking. Yet Lida saw no other way. Petra had to know. Calling the intruder to account without Petra to witness it, to understand it, to comprehend as much of the woman's devilishness as the child could, would mean that she had failed in her duty as a mother. It would mean that forever after, Petra would hold it against her that she took Vlasta away; Petra would ask questions, and even if one told her the truth, she would not believe it, and would carry in her the grudge.

Lida stepped deeper into the room, close to Petra. "I'm afraid, Miss Rehan," she said, "your employment in this house is terminated as of now. I will pay your fare to Prague, and your salary to the end of February."

"May I ask —" Vlasta stood pale, her lips drawn in, her eyes large.

Petra had rushed to Vlasta and was clinging to her and was saying in a pressed voice, "You won't take her away. I love her. I won't permit it. I'll go with her!"

With two steps, Lida was at Petra's side, pulling her from Vlasta, holding on to her wrist. "Yes, you may ask, Miss Rehan!" she said sharply. "I wish you would ask." And since Vlasta seemed unable to find the right words, Lida cried out, "You don't belong here —"

Petra was tearing at her mother's hand to get free. But the vise held. Packing and shifting heavy boxes and loaded trunks had turned Lida's arms and hands into muscles and sinews and calluses. Petra had to give in. She stood rooted, waiting for the moment when the grip would relax, freezing up with fright, refusing to believe that all this was real, and yet sensing that something beyond her power to perceive was rolling in on her.

"You don't belong here, Miss Rehan," Lida said more quietly. "I must protect my family."

Vlasta shook her head slightly. Her eyes regained their even expression. "But you're mistaken, Mrs. Benda! You don't have to be afraid of me. I didn't encourage anyone."

"It makes no difference."

"The few times I've seen your husband, I've kept strictly away from him. And as for Thomas Benda — he's very considerate, and I've a lot of sympathy for him. But beyond that —" Her slender fingers interlocked. "I have very little interest in men, and none at all in the men of your family."

"But in my daughter!" said Lida cuttingly. "Filth!" She felt suddenly very sure of herself, strong and clean and superior.

For the fraction of a second, absolute lack of understanding stood on every one of Vlasta's features. Then her face changed and filled with panic. "Oh my Lord — you don't think —"

Her head spun. The charge was so terrible that its very magnitude deprived her of all defense. And in front of Petra!

"I do not have to think!" Lida shot back. "I merely need open my eyes. I'm a very busy woman, very busy, I have a thousand and one things to do. You took advantage of me. You played up to Thomas, because he was a perfect front. But it wasn't the men in this family that you were after! It was this child — this unsuspecting child . . ."

Viciously, she tugged at Petra. Petra offered no resistance. Half-thoughts and impressions wildly careened through her mind. There had been this sweet, drawing feeling in her, high up in the air, on the Ferris wheel. There had been her joy in seeing Vlasta's pain when she told her of Dolezhal's hands. There had been her dreams and her waiting for Vlasta's caressing voice and for the touch of Vlasta's long, soft, wonderful fingers.

Had it been bad? Bad and forbidden and to be punished? And hadn't she known, all the time, that it was bad?

"It isn't true, Vlasta! Say it isn't true!"

Vlasta's tortured eyes turned to her. "It is not true, Petra."

But it sounded weak; Vlasta herself felt how weak. She wanted to cry out that it was a lie, that she loved Petra as you love a lovable, young human being — but all that would materialize in her throat was this toneless, spineless, guilty-sounding, "It is not true, Petra."

She tried to muster arguments. She despised men, the war had done that to her, the men in this war; it was like a wound in her that didn't want to heal. Petra had meant so much to her; Petra had been in need of love, and she had given it to her, because it helped both of them, and because inside of her was such a torrent of unused, unconsumed love. And Petra was at the age where young people naturally have a crush on their teachers.

They were good arguments, and there were more of them. Only they were useless with Lida, who would turn them and twist them into a confession of abhorrent sin.

"It is not true, Petra," she whispered, and attempted to smile.

Petra felt her mother let go of her wrist. She was free to fly into Vlasta's arms, to protect her with her own body from the blows that were being struck. She didn't move. She stood looking at Vlasta whose eyes seemed to be far away and whose fingers were toying with the silver medallion. A queer sense of guilt was in Petra's heart, and she knew she was no longer a child.

Lida's forehead was creased with the strain of having to think up what else had to be said.

"It is not true, Petra — " Vlasta began again.

"I forbid you to talk to my child!" Lida ordered. "Go to your room. Get your bundle together. Get out of this house!"

Vlasta walked past Petra and Lida. Her lips twitched and she seemed to be dragging herself to the door.

"I love you. . . ." Petra was not sure whether she had thought it or actually said it. At any rate, Vlasta had not heard it, because she failed to stop and turn; neither did Lida give any sign of reaction. Lida was preoccupied. She was praying to the mute force directing her fate for forgiveness if in guarding her child and upholding the God-given laws she had committed grave wrong; she was praying that the righteous might never be without a roof over their heads.

General Duchinsky sat in his chair, very straight, very soldierly; but his once-cheery face looked wan, his hands moved nervously, and the resonance of his voice was gone.

This was to have been Joseph's third and final meeting with him; time was running out. Joseph had memorized the detailed last instructions Dolezhal had given him to transmit — what Duchinsky was to do and where and at what time and with whom. When Dolezhal had asked whether Duchinsky could be trusted to come through on the assignment, Joseph had laughed reassuringly and had answered that, by now, the General was so deep in the matter that he would have to go the whole way.

Duchinsky's depressed and fidgety manner caused Joseph to spend some minutes on ordinary, harmless conversation — about Madame Duchinsky, who had returned from the visit to her relatives in England, about the disgusting food shortage which forced people to pay exorbitant black market prices, and how hard this was on an Army man with his limited pay. Joseph could understand the General's tension that expressed itself in the tautness of his posture, the darting of his eyes. Underneath his own calm exterior, Joseph felt much the same; but his political campaign, his dealings with his workers and the Works Council and his activities in the Assembly had forced him to learn control of his nerves.

He wanted only one thing — to get rid of his instructions and to forget about them. This much he remembered from his conspiratorial training after Munich: The less a man knew, the safer he could feel. Finally, he estimated that enough claptrap had passed between him and the General to ease the troubled waters and to launch into the main business, but just at that moment Duchinsky opened the drawer of his desk, looked worriedly at its contents, and sucked in his lips.

"Rifled," he said. "Come over here — I'll show you."

Duchinsky was a precise person; the symmetrical arrangement of papers and notebooks, pencils and files, in this middle drawer showed it.

"Looks all right to me!" said Joseph.

"Ah, but I have a certain method! Whoever went through this did a slipshod job, or he was in a hurry. These papers here, I had them filed with the date line away from me; now they've been turned around. My daybook — I always put it away face down, now it's face up — " He pulled out every drawer. "Same thing here — and here — and here. Small differences, only I can see them; noticed them immediately this morning. . . . Benda!"

"Yes?"

"I'm being watched. Wherever I go, there are people; they don't look at me, you know, but they watch. In front of my house — "

"You're imagining!"

The General nodded as if he were considering this consoling bit of thought. Then he said darkly, "I don't trust you, Benda! I don't trust your Minister Dolezhal. You say you two are the only ones who know about me

and about what we talked — " He pointed at the yawning drawers. "Well — how come?"

Joseph stared. He felt the bristly touch of fear at the back of his neck. If he and Dolezhal were the only ones who knew — and he was sure he had not breathed a word to anyone . . . Maybe someone close to Dolezhal! There was Novak; but Dolezhal had known for years that Novak was the enemy. Where was the leak? What about Duchinsky himself? Duchinsky had been hesitant from the beginning. Perhaps Duchinsky had played a part, had skillfully drawn out everything there was to be learned, and was now gracefully retiring and leaving him and Dolezhal in the trap. The desk had been rifled. . . . Who said so? Duchinsky. And it wasn't Dolezhal who would be trapped. Dolezhal was too big, entertained too many connections; he still had hanging on the wall of his office the framed thousand-crown bill he had won at poker from the chairman of the parliamentary club of Communist deputies. Dolezhal, Joseph grimaced, would drop him as you whisk a crumb off your table. . . .

"They're probably watching a lot of people," he said, summoning what morale was left in him. "They'd be complete fools if it didn't dawn on them that something is going on! And you're an important man, General! You should be flattered by their attention."

Slowly, the General closed his drawers one after the other. "I'm in no mood for flattery, Benda — or for your jokes."

"Neither am I, General!" Joseph knew it was futile. He knew Duchinsky had bowed out. "I have your instructions. Are you ready to listen?"

"No, I'm not! And I never will be! And I should never have listened to you!" Duchinsky had raised his voice but suddenly snapped it off. Even the leather upholstered double doors to his office were no longer necessarily soundproof. "And let me tell you this, Benda — if ever you should be questioned about your visits to me, you say we were talking about the possibility of your getting back into service. And you stick to that story! Because if you don't — I may be gone and dead — but I have loyal friends — and I'll reach out and get you. . . ."

"Yes, sir!" said Joseph and about-faced and went out. As he closed the outer door, he began to laugh. He had had a relapse into the military.

He had gone quite a distance toward the river when he slowed his pace. The little mirth he had felt had evaporated, and the fear he had covered with his laughter returned in full force.

It had been a fatal mistake to see Duchinsky at his headquarters; if the General was being watched, it stood to reason that whoever visited him would be tailed, too. Duchinsky should have called him up and warned him somehow; even if your phone is tapped, there are ways of making

yourself understood. But behind Duchinsky's big hulk was the mean little heart of a coward. Duchinsky was thinking only of himself, his own God-damned career, his own pink, healthy skin.

And what now? Report to Dolezhal that Duchinsky had refused to play along when the play became serious?

Two men had stepped on the traffic isle at the other side of the street, where the round blue lamp of the streetcar stop blinked dully in the waning light of the afternoon. The streetcar came clanging along and screeched to a halt and pulled away once more, its motor howling. The two men still stood there, waiting.

Joseph moved on, in the direction of the river. He kept his head slightly turned and observed out of the side of his eye. The two men said good-by to each other, in a casual manner. Perhaps they had met by chance on the traffic isle and had passed up the streetcar because they had been in the middle of a dirty story and hadn't wanted to miss the point. One, wearing a brown felt hat with a high black band and a ridiculously small brim, seemed to be waiting for the next tram. He had an empty face; its only decisive feature was a long, whitish, peaked nose. The other, in a pepper-and-salt raglan of considerable age, walked Joseph's way, but on the opposite sidewalk.

It might be nothing at all; but Joseph increased his speed, down the serpentine road that would lead him to the Moldau River and across to Smetana Square and the columned building of the Philosophical Faculty. The Raglan kept behind him. Joseph thought of jumping on a passing streetcar; the cars, however, traveled so slowly on the steep incline that his pursuer could have made a spurt easily and jumped on after him. He would postpone boarding a tram until he reached the foot of the hill, from where the cars, going across the bridge, ran at a good clip.

At the streetcar stop at the foot of the hill Joseph waited. The Raglan ambled a few steps ahead and then lit a cigarette and lingered to study the dreary landscape.

Joseph had a pain in the back of his head. He was trying to think, but his thoughts came in dashes without much connection. The great plan was lost and betrayed. Duchinsky wouldn't have reneged unless he knew more than he was saying. The Communists controlled the Ministry of Interior and the police; they had their spies everywhere — somebody had tipped them off, they were getting ready to crack down on everybody who had ever done anything for Dolezhal's plan! That included Joseph Benda, Deputy. They would whip up some treason charge, and his parliamentary immunity wouldn't help him a whit. . . . He knew how those things were operated, he and Dolezhal would have proceeded exactly that way if they had come out on top. . . .

What could he do? Ah, the phony promises the Minister had given him! *Resign as National Administrator — you'll get everything back: your own, your property.* What an illusion! Only God can make a tree grow, but even He cannot ungrow it. If you have the hard luck of having to live in such a period — well, then you make your adjustments, you live! And what was so terrible about being a National Administrator? It was a job, it was better paid than most, and at least one still made glass!

A plague on Dolezhal! Dolezhal, who had ridden him into this! From the very beginning, the man had had tentacles out for him, from the day he'd come to Prague to plead for the Works — no, from the days back in London. But this was the end. The Raglan over there, watching and waiting, like a snake waiting for a rabbit . . . The end, yes. He would wash his hands of the plan and the conspiracy and the mad ambitions and the fears and the running away. He'd go back to Rodnik, back home. There was still Vesely's, and a man must learn how to be modest. He would write a letter to the President of the Assembly, and another letter to the chairman of the parliamentary club of Dolezhal's Party. The letters would be couched nicely and respectfully, but simply, and their contents would be clear: I, Joseph Benda, can't stand it any longer. I am through. I want to work. I want to work hard. I want to build something. That's what I was made for. Look at my hands. Maybe I'll design glass, maybe I'll make it with my own breath and my own fingers. I can make a living for myself and my wife and my child any day. I don't want to lick boots any more, I don't want to have to lie and to intrigue and to be on the run.

And maybe they'll let me alone. Maybe they'll let me work and live.

He looked at the Raglan, who was stamping out his cigarette. A Number One car drew up. Joseph waited until the tram purred away, then he made a dash and hopped the trailer. The Raglan was still immersed in the landscape.

Joseph sighed, relieved. He found a seat and eased into it. He showed his deputy's pass to the conductor. The conductor said, "My compliments, sir!" and raised his finger to the shield of his cap. The headache ceased to hack at Joseph's brain, he gave the conductor an indifferent smile and settled back into the stale warmth of the car.

It had been nothing. He had let himself get rattled by a lughead of a General and a man in a raglan coat who had been taking a walk. Dolezhal was much too clever to slip up, and for one Duchinsky who deserted, there were dozens of braver men who didn't see ghosts. Duchinsky had probably put his daybook face up, himself — everybody slipped up once in a while. And as for the papers lying the other way — the most meticulous people are the ones who forget most easily; otherwise why would they have to be so meticulous?

Nevertheless, Joseph wanted to make absolutely sure that he was not being followed. He got out after only two stops, in front of the Hus Memorial. In the maze of the crooked streets and passageways of the Old Town, any pursuer would be easily recognized and even more easily shaken off.

Joseph laughed soundlessly — as a boy, he had played many such games. He was the only passenger to leave the car, and aside from a few nondescript people gaping at the ruins of the old City Hall and at the destroyed face of the astronomical clock at its tower, the street was empty.

It was fantastic. Why *should* anyone follow him? They knew he was staying at the Esplanade, and they could pick up his trail any day in front of the Assembly. Well, they might want to know where he went after his visit to Duchinsky — he would show them. He would lead them a merry chase. He was going nowhere.

He ducked into a passageway and stopped at a tobacco stand which was built into the corner of a narrow-breasted house with wooden balustrades. The woman sold him a pack of cheap cigarettes. He glanced behind. The courtyard formed by the aged houses was empty. He snickered. I'm getting as nervous as Duchinsky, I can't let these things get me, times are hard and I have to win out and go back to Rodnik and take over my factory and the Hammer Works and become master of my own life again. Anyhow, this murkiness before the storm won't last much longer. It's going to break soon. . . . Jesus Christ, it couldn't be too soon for him.

He decided to give up the stupid Cops-and-Robbers game. He could cut directly to the Old Opera House and from there, passing through a short one-lane street, come out in the modern part of town, at Wenceslas Square. He felt safe, and it was darkening, too. He walked quickly, listening to the clucking of his soles on the wet pavement. He dug his hands into his pockets and whistled the beginning of a tune. He could see a cutout of the lights of Wenceslas Square.

He stopped. Where the narrow street opened on the square stood the Brown Hat, with the high black band and the ridiculously small brim, and from under it jutted the whitish, peaked, overlong nose.

Joseph felt out of place in the dingy waiting room to Karel's office. The old man with the bandaged foot, the two women with the thin faces and the kerchiefs wrapped tightly around their heads, had stopped talking very soon after he entered and sat down in the corner. He had tried small talk with them since he knew them slightly, as he knew most of the citizens of Rodnik; but there was no making headway against their morose silence. Out of Karel's office sounded the faint whimpering of a child.

Joseph sighed and recrossed his legs. He hated this odor, this mixture of Lysol and the sweat of anxiety, it made him want to swallow. He had asked Karel to come to the house; Karel had said that a thorough examination had to be done at the office.

The child, a girl, came out, still crying and holding her ear. One of the women jumped up and said, "Now, it doesn't hurt, it doesn't hurt, does it?" Then she pulled out a pocket comb with some of its teeth missing and ran it vigorously through the child's hair, which was matted with perspiration. There were new tears, and the other woman ran up with a handkerchief and held it in front of the girl's nose. "There, blow!"

Then the women and the child were gone. Karel appeared in the door, nodded briefly to Joseph, and gestured the old man to come in. The old man shuffled along heavily. The door closed.

If Karel hadn't seen him, Joseph might have left and gone back home. He was afraid. He'd always been well, never a day's sickness except for the measles and whooping cough when he was a boy. When Peter Benda had finally given permission to Karel to take up the study of medicine, he had joked that the family, at least, would never have to pay a doctor's bill. Joseph had made no use of that privilege. It was Thomas who had always been sickly.

Joseph didn't believe much in doctors. They took a little symptom and blew it up into a great big disease; only the Army doctors were different: they gave you a five-minute checkup and a kick in the behind and said, "Get out of here; there's nothing wrong with you!" Now he was full of symptoms that worried him and kept him awake at night.

He wished he knew whether Karel was a good man professionally. The workers seemed to trust him, but the workers were glad to get any kind of medical service. He needed a good doctor. In Prague, there were plenty of them. He couldn't go back to Prague, no ten horses could drag him there; he was through with Prague — at least until he knew about the outcome of the plan and about Dolezhal. . . .

He must not think of this. It was behind him. He was in Rodnik and he had already stuck his nose into Vesely's affairs and spent a whole morning bringing some order into the mess Lida had left. Lida needed a doctor, too. Badly. A psychiatrist. And Petra would hardly speak to him. She was weepy and pale, mourning over Vlasta. But she wouldn't tell him why Vlasta had gone, and Lida would give him no more than a few hints that made no sense — and anyhow, he couldn't go and search for Vlasta. The whole world was going crazy, and he was a sick man.

"Come in, please!" said Karel.

The old man, a fresh bandage around his foot, was shuffling out. Joseph got up and followed Karel into the office. He looked around.

"Nice," he said. "You've got it nice here. All this machinery. Use the X-ray, much?"

Karel sat down on a small metal stool and pointed at a chair. He took a form from his desk and began to fill it out. "You're still covered by insurance," he said. "It runs a while after you've left your job."

"I can pay you," said Joseph.

"You've paid already, out of your salary." Karel ran his hand through his hair. "Socialism. It works also for the better classes."

He pulled up a chair and placed it in front of him.

"Sit down."

He reached for the round mirror with the hole in its center and strapped it to his forehead.

"Open your mouth. Tongue out. Say Ah."

"Don't gag me!"

Karel threw away the tongue depressor.

"Well," said Joseph with a tight smile, "what have you seen?"

"Nothing, as yet." Karel held out a glass. "Take that. Fill it, will you?"

"Here?"

"The toilet, unfortunately, is at the other end of this flat. I've seen people urinate before, you know." Karel was watching his brother. Joseph's hand shook as he took the glass. Joseph turned his back. Why was Joseph here and not in Prague? The Assembly was still in session. Was he really ill, or had something happened to drive him home to Rodnik and into this office?

He took the warm glass from Joseph and poured some of the urine into a test tube.

"About those headaches — what kind of headaches are they? Steady?"

"No, but very frequent."

"All over your head, or in certain places?"

"Sometimes in the back, but mostly all over."

"They come in waves?"

"Yes."

Karel let a few drops of acetic acid fall into the test tube.

"How long have you had the pains?"

"Oh, a few days. Maybe five or six."

"You were still in Prague when they started?"

Joseph blinked nervously. "Yes, it was in Prague."

Karel poured urine into a second test tube and added Fehling solution. Then he struck a match, lit the Bunsen burner and heated the tubes.

"What's that for?" Joseph asked hastily. "You don't think I'm really sick! I'm strong as a bull —"

"Describe the pains in your heart." Karel was shaking the tubes and holding them against the light.

"That one's green!" said Joseph. "Does that mean anything?"

"It means your blood sugar is fine. But then, the Bendas never went in for diabetes. Those sharp, stabbing pains in your heart — tell me more about them."

Joseph sat down unhappily. His fingers drummed on the metal arm-rest of the chair. "It's a terrible tightness. As if somebody had put a strong rubber band around my heart. And my heart pumps like mad, right up into my throat. It's a funny thing about the heart; you never notice you have one until it gets bad." He laughed. "Isn't that so?"

"Take off your jacket and your shirt. There, put them on the cot. Did anything happen to upset you? Any excitement? Strain?"

The tie wouldn't come loose. Joseph pulled hard. "No," he said.

"Nothing?"

"Nothing. The usual politics and frustrations. . . ." He turned, stripped to the waist, and faced his brother. He felt cold and shivered and was embarrassed because his nipples stood up.

"I'm the doctor around here," said Karel. "If you want me to help you, you'd better give me the truth."

"What happens in Prague has nothing to do with my body!" But it was absurd to talk loudly when you had to hold your pants up at the same time.

Karel opened the oblong box with the sphygmomanometer and wrapped the flat rubber tube around Joseph's upper arm. Then he pumped. He saw Joseph bite his lips. Slowly, listening to the pulse in the big artery and watching the mercury against the scale, he released pressure. The reading was 170 over 80. Prague had nothing to do with the body? What was Joseph hiding?

"What have you seen now?" asked Joseph.

"Blood, as we Bendas know, is peculiar stuff. It talks." Karel closed the instrument and looked seriously at his brother.

"Don't try to scare me with your hocus-pocus! Blood talks. piss turns green. What next?"

"I'm not trying to scare you. I want to find out what's wrong with you. Come close."

He reached forward and pulled Joseph's lids apart and let the tiny, sharp ray of a flashlight fall into the center of his eye. The pupil was overly dilated, but it contracted quickly under the light.

"How deep can you see there?"

"It's just another test," said Karel. Novak was right. There was some-

thing behind Joseph's resignation as National Administrator. "A man can't cut out the core of his life and expect it not to show somewhere. Dizzy spells?"

"Once. On Wenceslas Square. When I saw a brown hat."

"Whose brown hat?"

"A man's. I don't know him."

"Cross your legs."

A quick blow with a small hammer. The leg jerked up.

"What made you decide to give up the Works?"

"I had so much to do. A deputy works hard, too."

"And if you aren't re-elected?"

"I'm tired."

Karel plugged the ends of the stethoscope into his ears and held its cold metal disk against his brother's heart. His brother's heart . . . Listen to its beat. It beat fast, about hundred and ten. But what was inside it? What were its cravings, urges, feelings? The stethoscope didn't tell. Hocus-pocus; maybe Joseph had hit the nail on the head. We know nothing. All we can do is to try and to have pity. But who can afford pity?

He moved the disk upwards. "Breathe hard. Faster. Through the open mouth."

"It makes me dizzy! I have a heart condition!"

"Cough!"

There were no *râles*. The skin was goose-pimpled around the disk. Karel felt curiously close to his brother. He couldn't afford pity, but he felt it anyhow. If only Joseph would talk, tell him, reassure him that there was nothing at the bottom of all this!

"What do you hear?" said Joseph.

"Your chest is in order."

"I wasn't worried about my chest."

"Lie down on the cot."

Joseph obeyed. Karel sat down next to him.

"Pull your pants down. Yes, you have to. I'm your doctor."

Joseph watched the blue tattoo on Karel's arm. Then he winced as he felt Karel's fingers dig into the soft of his abdomen.

"You've been having pains in the stomach, too?"

"Not exactly pains. Just a horrible sinking feeling, as if the bottom falls out. And cramps sometimes, but they go away. What's wrong with me, Karel? You've got to help me. I'm still young. I want to live. There's so much to live for. . . ."

Karel got up. He came back with a piece of soaked cotton and swabbed the tip of Joseph's ring finger. Then he pricked it.

Joseph started.

Karel pressed the finger and sucked a drop of blood into a pipette. Then he swabbed the finger once more and released it.

"You may get dressed."

Joseph dressed in silence. Karel was busy with the blood test and with entries on his form. Joseph wiped his forehead and his lips and sat down. He felt his knees tremble. After a while, Karel put away his pen.

"Well, doctor — the verdict!" He looked at Karel with anxious eyes. He tried to read Karel's gaunt face, the deep lines that ran from the sides of his nose to the corners of his mouth and down his chin.

"I'll give you a prescription. You take one pill whenever you feel the headache coming on, or when you think your heart starts acting up. But that's just so as to take the bother of it away. Tell me something — what are your plans for the future?"

"Why — isn't there much future left?"

"Organically, you are perfect."

"What about my heart?"

"All right, physically. But there are really two hearts. The one that I can check on, and the other which the writers and poets and priests talk about. *That* heart is somewhere near the breaking point. And it affects the organic heart, and the brain and the blood and the stomach and the eyes — everything. The pills won't help you. You can go to the Tatra Mountains or to Karlsbad; in fact you should — but that won't help, either. What has happened to you? Where does the strain come from? Don't you want to tell me?"

"Have you ever been followed?"

"Followed? Right up to Buchenwald. You mean that kind of followed?"

"Yes! By people who want to check up on you! By people who think . . ."

"Think what?"

Karel had a good face, a kind face, an understanding face. He was a doctor, a brother, and his eyes were like deep wells into which you could sink yourself and your pains. And he was the enemy, too.

"My imagination must have run away with me. My nervous condition, my other heart, you know?" Joseph forced a laugh.

Karel felt the nexus snap.

"I'm through!" Joseph proclaimed. "I'm through with politics, with big affairs; I want to live in peace." And if Dolezhal did succeed?

"That's fine," Karel said professionally. "That's a wise decision."

"Yes," said Joseph. "Anyhow, we ought to know soon. . . ."

"Know what?"

"About the future. Whether I'm all right. You don't think I should see a specialist?"

"I don't think it is necessary," said Karel. "But you can do as you please."

He took Joseph to the door and let him out and closed the door behind him.

Karel was restless. A big weather was brewing; Joseph's malaise was part of it, and maybe Vlasta's disappearance, too — and other things. He could feel it, but he could not yet see what the shape of the clouds portended. He wondered what Novak had done with his information.

CHAPTER TWELVE

There are two sides to freedom: *demand* and *obligation*. Those who most frequently use the word for their own purposes usually forget the obligation implied in the concept of freedom.

And what is this obligation? I have been able to find no stronger or more concise formulation than the one promulgated by the Apostle Paul in 2 Thessalonians 3, 10: "If any would not work, neither should he eat. . . ."

FROM THOMAS BENDA: *Essay on Freedom*

THOMAS arrived at Wilson Station. He sent his suitcase on ahead to the Aurora by porter; then he stepped out into the wet, chilling wind of the street.

And there he hesitated. Up to this point he had been driven by the relentless impact of Vlasta's disappearance, by the subtle scorn with which Lida had plied him that afternoon when he had come to teach school and had found Vlasta gone, by the sudden emptiness inside him — a pit without bottom into which his energies and his morale seemed to drain. But he hadn't laid out any course of action beyond ascertaining from the stationmaster in Rodnik that a girl fitting Vlasta's description had bought a ticket to Prague, and beyond telling Kitty that he was going to ask Vaclav Villner about his essay. He doubted if Kitty believed that this was the whole truth; it did not matter. It did not matter what people thought and what Kitty felt. In the few short weeks, Vlasta had grown to be the pole around which his daily life circled, the token of his independence and inner security, the fountainhead of stimulation and inspiration, the one person in the world for whom he wanted to keep on living and go on working. Perhaps, he thought, this was too frenzied, too unhappy, too

monomaniacal an approach — perhaps it was morbid to channel all one's relationship to the outside through the eyes and the approval of one single individual; but that was as it had turned out to be.

Where was he to begin? Vexed, he realized how little he knew of the woman he had elevated to this decisive peak. She had roomed at the Declerques Institute, and had left there; but had she had some residence aside from that? Did she have friends, relatives, casual acquaintances with whom she might have found a roof and a bed? He and Vlasta had never talked about that; the ordinary things which fill the conversations of ordinary people had rarely been mentioned between them. Neither had money matters, though he knew that she was poor — he had visions of her in the most desperate need, huddling in doorways at night, the soles of her shoes torn, her beautiful, sensitive hands numb and chapped from the raw cold. Of course, this was a maudlin picture. There must be, in this big city, homes for the homeless and places where they could get a bowl of soup; and Vlasta had gone without cracking up through worse things than the loss of a job. But to Thomas it was equally depressing to speculate on her sitting somewhere quite comfortably and not in need of him at all.

Sensibly, he decided to make his first stop at the main post office and to have a look at the Prague directory. He crossed the park in front of the station and walked the two blocks to the large, drab, high-windowed building. He wondered faintly about the great number of people on the streets who clustered in smaller or larger groups and seemed to be immersed in discussions, some excited, some dispassionate; but he gave them no second thought. Neither did the presence at the entrance of the post office of two policemen, looking taller than their height in their olive-drab great-coats, raise any misgivings in his mind.

Inside the spacious hall along whose walls ran the counters and windows of the clerks, all was quiet. At the place marked *Informace* he got the book. It was an old book, greasy, much-handled, with whole pages mutilated. "There is no other," said the man, "they haven't printed any since the war."

And how much had happened during the war and afterwards! People killed, displaced, removed. . . . Thomas scanned the columns: *Regner* — *Regučík* — *Regvitský*. . . . His hands tore at the page, turned it over: *Rehubek* — *Rechagen* — *Rehapil*. . . . Softly, he closed the volume and returned it.

"Found it?" said the man.

"No."

"You don't know how many people have come here and looked at this book!" said the man sadly. "Family of yours?"

"No."

He could go to the police. Vlasta would have to register with the police

to get her ration tickets. No, that wouldn't work. She might not yet have registered. Or it might take months until the information traveled from the local precinct to headquarters. And wherever he inquired, the police would ask him: What is your authority? Why do you want her? Are you a detective? A claims collector? A relative? Under what circumstances did she disappear? What do you suspect? Murder? And some reporter would pick up the story and write a cute item: *Novelist Searches for Pretty Schoolteacher*. And Vlasta would read it and smile a little and withdraw further.

The newspapers — there was an idea! But it had to be done discreetly. . . . He could place a few lines in the classified columns, not of one paper, but of all of them. *Vlasta R. — Urgent you communicate with Thomas B. at Hotel Aurora*. That sounded inconspicuous enough, and she would understand — if she bothered to read the small ads.

He left the post office and turned towards Wenceslas Square, where the big newspapers had their offices. As he approached the square, the crowds were packed more densely, traffic had slowed down, and the air was filled with shouts and song. An amplifier truck stood in front of the corner building where the Communist *Rudé Pravo* had its large window displays. Its loud-speakers were blaring a catchy tune, a Red Army march Thomas knew from the war. Some men were singing along, excitement on their faces; others were trying to talk over the noise.

He made an attempt at elbowing through the crowd so as to reach the ground-floor store in which they accepted advertisements for insertion; it was impossible. The space above the door, usually reserved for the latest sports results, was hung with hurriedly lettered news releases. The Cabinet was about to meet. Some of the Ministers were demanding that the Minister of Interior revoke his order to replace eight high officials of the Prague police.

Thomas frowned. All this turmoil over eight policemen! It sounded crazy. Then the music stopped and he caught snatches of what the people were saying.

"What about the Constitution? How much longer do they think they can hold up on that?"

"They want to break up the National Front!"

"That's cockeyed. Why should they do that?"

Thomas still was endeavoring to push through.

"And the nationalization? Nothing but sabotage!"

"We don't want a police state! Down with the Minister of Interior!"

"Hah, what do you want this country to become? We're overrun with speculators as is, you dirty black-marketeer!"

"Nationalize everything!"

"At least down to fifty workers!"

"Thirty!"

Thomas was listening, almost against his will. He felt the smell and the hot breath of the people, the uncouth dialect, the plain words. Some of their excitement transmitted itself to him, although he was not clear as to who wanted what. The faces around him gained individuality. Wedged in between them as he was, he saw their stories plainly — the war and the deprivation, the work and the passion, greed and resignation, suffering and search. He tried to find a meaning and was acutely aware of how much he missed Vlasta. With her at his side, he could have thrown himself into the turbulence and enjoyed the current and gained and kept direction; without her, he was like a leaf drifting.

The crowd spewed him out just as a swarthy, high-cheeked young man was mounting a news vendor's chair and beginning to harangue, "Comrades . . . !"

Beyond the streetcar tracks, diagonally across the square, was the elaborate building which housed the editorial and business offices of *Svobodné Slovo*. Thomas, hoping for better luck there, treaded his way between honking automobiles and trams whose drivers kept hammering at their bells in an effort to get through the length of the square. When he reached the broad sidewalk in front of the newspaper office, he found another mass of people, another sound truck, and mounted at the windows of the second floor a motion-picture screen from which the head of President Benes was speaking inaudible words. A number of young men and girls, apparently students, were shouting, "Freedom! We want freedom! Long live President Benes!" — and the loud-speaker began to pour out "John Brown's Body."

Thomas couldn't help himself — he, too, hummed the melody. Freedom, he was thinking — they want freedom, everybody wants freedom, across the square they want it just the same *John Brown's body . . . But his soul goes marching on . . . !* They must have picked up the tune and the text when the Americans were in Pilsen. Elinor would find it very fitting. What a confusion — the people, the cars, the music! From the opposite side of the square came the competing rhythm: *The International Soviet will free the human race . . .* Freedom. The Essay should be in print, now! They should bring down piles of copies and hand them to the people, let me speak. I could tell them about freedom, and what it means. Do they think they will get it by shouting? . . . Oh, Vlasta! . . . If they shout loud enough . . . the walls of Jericho came down through noise, and look at the desert the victors made out of Canaan.

On both sides of the square, the music ended. But the din of voices continued. And then, suddenly — he didn't know how it began — the nostalgic

strains of the National Anthem came over, and people joined it everywhere, and the traffic policeman at the corner where Vodicek Street ran into the square stood at attention. They all sang it — Thomas, too: *Where is my home . . . ?*

He could not get into the newspaper office. He turned and walked away, uphill, toward Vinohrady.

Over the section of the city through which he now went hung an oppressive quiet. The curtains in the windows of the stately houses were drawn, the shutters of most of the stores had come down, the wide glass panels of the coffeeshouses yawned empty.

He found the gate to the Declerques Institute locked; but after much ringing and knocking, it sprang open and he was permitted to enter. A quivering maid turned the key behind him, and he found himself faced by an old man in tails and a starched white shirt who brandished an unsheathed cavalry saber.

"Count Tolstoy, sir!" the old man said. "What do you wish?"

"Can I see Mademoiselle Declerques? And what in heaven's name are you doing with that saber?"

The Count let his rheumy eyes wander over the visitor. "There'll be a revolution, don't you know?" He rolled his R's. "I've felt it coming for days. I have quite some experience with revolutions. What's your name?"

"Thomas Benda."

Count Arkadij Tolstoy jammed his saber back into its rust-spotted scabbard. "Not much good, this thing," he explained, "but it would frighten marauders." He gave the maid an imperious nod. "Go, tell Mademoiselle!"

Thomas found the Count not as ludicrous as he had appeared at first glance. There was something touchingly quixotic about his readiness to fight the flood of time with an old cavalry saber.

"It's better, of course," said Tolstoy, "to have a regiment of Cossacks behind you. Would you believe that such a saber can sever the head from the trunk with one blow?" The Count's eyes grew sad. "But in the end, my men simply dwindled away."

"I don't like killing," said Thomas.

The Count shrugged. "Your brother, the Deputy, must be quite busy now?"

"He's home, doing nothing."

Arkadij Tolstoy frowned. "The men dwindled away . . ." he said. "Just like that."

Mademoiselle stood at the head of the staircase. The lacework of her white collar was like a continuation of the wrinkles on her face and throat.

Her small eyes darted about anxiously. "Please, do come up!" she called. "Count Tolstoy should have let you through; but he always interprets my orders too literally. You see, I'm keeping all the girls in, today —"

"Forgive me —" Thomas began.

As he made no move to come up, she started to descend, taking one step at a time. "Has Mr. Joseph Benda sent you? How thoughtful of him, on a day like this! Will you stay here awhile? It would be such a relief for us, such a protection. . . ."

"I'm sorry," said Thomas. "I'm in a great hurry."

"And how is Petra?" Mademoiselle had reached the bottom of the stairs and stretched out her frail hand to have it kissed.

Thomas obliged and said, "Fine, thank you. But that's not what I came here for."

"What do you wish?"

"Is Vlasta Rehan here?"

"Here?" said Mademoiselle, horrified.

"Or do you know where she might be?"

He saw Mademoiselle straighten. Her nostrils trembled. "Mr. Benda! I had hoped never again to hear that name! It's persons like her who bring about all this uproar, this violence, this disorder —"

"Have you any idea as to where —"

"Have I? Oh, yes!"

He felt his heart suddenly distend and press against his windpipe. "Tell me — please!"

"Somewhere in the mob, that's where she'll be. Rioting, seducing, plundering, burning. . . . Curse her! Curse all of them! Curse —"

Thomas fled.

The sky was overcast and the clouds hung pregnant with snow. He walked the streets, the direction of his mind and of his search frayed like the end of a much-used piece of string. Perhaps there had been some truth in what the Declerques woman in her hate had said: Somewhere among the masses of people congregating in the center of the city, among the groups gathering, the crowds milling, would be Vlasta.

He drifted back toward Wenceslas Square, but kept to the fringe of the commotion. As a child, he remembered, he had believed in the luck that came from finding a four-leaf clover, and he had searched a segment of field, strip by strip, and had found nothing. But when he had given up, tired and hot, and dragged his feet through the dust of the road home, not thinking, gazing emptily across the ditch which ran alongside the wagon tracks, he had picked up a four-leaf clover. There was a trick to finding what you were after; in the face of a jealous fate you must act as

if you weren't interested at all, but go about some business or other — all the while, however, subtly helping your purpose along; you cannot force the hand of the goddess, but when you've lulled her asleep, and when you least expect it, the hand will open and shed what you prayed for. -

He puzzled over the kind of decoy he might use. It had to be something fairly important, something which would occupy the surface of his mind. He had eaten nothing since morning; he was not hungry, but he told himself he was and stepped into a butcher shop and bought a pair of hot sausages. He surrendered his stamps for meat and bread; the mustard was free. He ate slowly, alternately dipping the sausage and the bread into the large yellow blob on his plate. He wiped his mouth on his handkerchief and decided that he could no longer think about food. And then he had the obvious idea, so obvious that he scolded himself for not having thought of it sooner. In fact, he told himself, he had thought of it all along — hadn't he said to Kitty he was going to Prague to see about the Essay? Hadn't he stood among the people who shouted for freedom, a spokesman without platform, an arbiter without mandate, and wished with every nerve that his book was out and could lend him the weight and the stature to guide their crude but honest impulses? The very turmoil in which they found themselves imposed on him the obligation to let nothing stop him from making his contribution; and, leading his logic to its conclusion, he felt that an effort at fulfilling his obligation would somehow pacify the Unnamed and Unnameable Forces and bring Vlasta to him.

He debated whether he should take a taxi to the offices of People's Books, but chose to walk, on the chance that he might run into Vlasta. And though he didn't, he arrived in good spirits and was ushered into the presence of Vaclav Villner.

Villner worked in a narrow room which had been formed by partitioning a bigger one. Its walls were densely hung with enlargements of profile and front views which the German police photographers had snapped of Czech writers, artists, and newspapermen who later had been executed or tortured or starved to death. Villner did not turn as Thomas entered. He stood hunched over a radio set, his narrow face screwed tight, his stubby fingers on the dial.

Then, as if surprised, he wheeled around. "This is it!" he said, "this is it!"

There was relief in his voice, as if a long-delayed climax had finally broken; anxiety, too, badly hidden.

"Please?" said Thomas.

"They have resigned, Dolezhal and the others, a whole dozen of them — twelve Ministers!"

"Well," said Thomas with equanimity, "so the President will name a dozen others in their place."

Villner shook his head over so much naïveté. "But don't you see what it means? This is the stroke they've been preparing, this is the declaration of war!"

"I'm Thomas Benda, Mr. Villner. I'm the author of the 'Essay on Freedom.'"

Villner waved impatiently. "I know, I know! You were announced. Take a seat. Excuse me. . . ."

He turned back to the radio and shifted the dial. There were shreds of music. "No more news," he said, more to himself than to Thomas. "I'm going to leave the radio on, if you don't mind. I'm sure they'll interrupt this damned music in a minute. . . . Well, Mr. Benda, I suppose you have come —"

"About the Essay," Thomas finished the sentence.

Villner pulled down his crumpled vest and frowned. His black, tense eyes glanced along his picture gallery. "They've left us a difficult bequest," he said. "Must live up to them, you know. . . ."

Thomas swallowed. He had not expected to find in Villner a kindred mind who felt the inferiority of the living, as he did.

"I've tried," said Thomas.

"Have you?" Villner looked up quizzically. "Mr. Benda, you've come at a bad time. I should have instructed my secretary to tell you that I wasn't in. But then I thought I might as well see you."

"I'm very grateful."

"They've resigned," said Villner. "Now what's going to happen? The President will insist that a cabinet in which two of the parties of the National Front are not represented is no cabinet at all. The bolters want to force the Prime Minister's hand, they want to force him and the rest of the Cabinet to resign, too. And with the National Front split up, there will be no working majority in Parliament. The President will name an emergency cabinet of non-party officials and specialists — and good-by nationalization, good-by social insurance, good-by everything the people won in 1945. It's plain as the nose on your face!"

The radio was playing something from "Schwanda the Bagpiper"; it sounded frivolous as an accompaniment to Villner's worried analysis.

"What do you think, Mr. Benda?"

"I really couldn't say. How can anyone say what the politicians will do?"

Villner was again pulling at his vest. "You've written a political book, Mr. Benda! You must have *some* opinions!"

Thomas began to feel ill-at-ease. "I've come at a bad time, as you said. Perhaps I should see you tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow will be worse. Tomorrow we may not be here in this office. You don't understand at all, Mr. Benda! This is no longer a matter for

politicians sitting around a table; this will be fought out in the factories and on the streets."

Thomas thought of the people on the square. He had not been able to see any direction there, any decision, anything to warrant Villner's prediction.

"But I forgot," said Villner — "According to your book, you do not always trust the people."

"Do you?"

Villner's face flushed in an angry red. "Yes, I do!" he stated.

Then why was Villner afraid? thought Thomas. He compared the editor of People's Books with Barsiny. Barsiny had been smooth, imperturbable. Villner was worn much too raw to hide anything. And yet, there was in both the same kind of fear, even though each of them might fear something different.

He should never have come here. He should have waited till they sent back his manuscript with a note regretting that . . . *et cetera, et cetera*. The recognition of the rejection did not even hurt, perhaps because the book was at this moment to Thomas only a means to an end, an offering to fate, so that he might meet Vlasta again.

But Villner wasn't willing to let it go at saying, *Mr. Benda, we don't want your book, good day!* Villner's own apprehensions were seeking an outlet, and he believed he had found it. Furthermore, Villner was of the opinion that an author must be helped intellectually.

"You either believe in people, or you are a cynic. You are either on the side of the people, or on the side of their enemies," Villner began.

The music broke off. A voice said in measured tones:

"This is Radio Prague. We interrupt our scheduled program for a special announcement.

"We have learned from authoritative sources that the President has asked the Prime Minister, Mr. Klement Gottwald, to visit him for a special conference on the cabinet crisis. As previously reported, the crisis broke when the Minister of Interior refused to revoke his order to replace eight high officials of the security police in Prague. The non-Communist Ministers boycotted this morning's cabinet meeting. For four hours, the Communist Ministers sat and waited alone. By four o'clock in the afternoon, twelve Ministers of the other parties tendered their resignation. The Social-Democratic Ministers have not yet made any decision, pending a meeting of the executive committee of their Party tonight.

"We now resume our concert music. . . ."

Villner jumped up. "What did I tell you?"

Thomas said, "Perhaps you are nervous because you look at history in too narrow a perspective. . . ."

"Too narrow?" Villner's hands swept over the pictures on his wall. "Here is my perspective! And let me tell you about your book —" With an impatient motion of his head Villner shook back his long, thin hair. "It is precisely because I look at your book in a historical perspective that I am throwing it back at you. There were periods when what you have to say would have been acceptable; and there are others when your ideas turn into weapons for those who at this minute are trying to shackle our people once more. . . ."

The thin-chested, hawk-faced little editor exuded a hatred which Thomas felt physically. And with frightening lucidity he saw how unbearable it would be for him if men like Villner ever took full power. Yet the nationalization, the social insurance, the things which Villner and his kind had won and wanted, were good and useful things, and it was bad to try to deprive the people of them.

Thomas threw up his hands. "I know my essay is not a Marxist book; my brother told me so. But the truth is the truth, Marxist or not!"

"That's where you're wrong!" cried Villner. "There is no such thing as an absolute truth — as you yourself, Mr. Benda, came pretty close to saying in your book. Your truth is different from mine; what the twelve Ministers who resigned consider as truth is not the truth for the people who will march to defend themselves and their rights and their country."

The tune of the polka that came from the radio joined with the uncompromising tone of Villner's voice and jumbled Thomas's thoughts.

"What is your book, Mr. Benda? You look at this side and that, with an impartiality which in reality does not exist, and you throw doubts on everything. In another time, in a society which is firmly established and not threatened from anywhere, we could afford to print a thing like that. But today, of all days? When all we fought for, all these men died for, stands in jeopardy? Do you throw doubt into the heart and the mind of a soldier who goes into battle? Do you throw acid into his eyes? This, Mr. Benda, would be treason. This, Mr. Benda, is what you have committed!"

Thomas chuckled. Only a short while ago, he had dreamed of being the guide, the arbiter, the interpreter, of the muddled, mute desire of his people; now he was being accused of betraying them.

"What do you laugh at?" said Villner irritably. "Was there anything funny in what I said?"

"Not at all! No!" said Thomas. "I was laughing at myself." He bent his head and stared at the faded linoleum between his feet. "You know, Mr. Villner, I, who used to be the Spokesman of Czechoslovakia, am coming to feel that I have no place in this country."

The polka had ended, there was a short silence.

"I'm sorry," said Villner. "I didn't mean to —"

The announcer had begun to speak again. The President, he declared, had as yet refused to accept the resignation of the twelve Ministers. As far as the Head of the State was concerned, the Cabinet as constituted was still in office.

The lobby, the whole ground floor of the Hotel Alcron was overflowing with people this teatime. It was as if this headquarters of the rich and the prominent, with its marble, its plush, its elaborate chandeliers, its chromium, its mirrors, had been turned into a refuge for fur-coated, nylon-stockinged women and men with paunchy, worried faces who were hoping to outsit the storm. They were talking in suppressed voices; the heavy hush was cut through only by the tinkling of silver pots and chinaware as the waiters maneuvered silently between the tables, or by the occasional hysterical giggling of girls for whom the doom of the hour had become too much to bear. Every so often, a news vendor would come through the revolving door with the latest extras; men would raise a finger commandingly and pass him a coin and devour the headlines. The crown tumbled under the table; dollars, pounds sterling, French francs, guilders, were in heavy if whispered demand; and even such trash as the Allied Occupation mark rose steeply in value.

Thomas sat pressed into a corner, half-hidden behind his newspaper. To his right, at the same table, a man with a golden watch fob was explaining to a younger one how President Benes was about to declare a state of emergency and to call out the Army; and that would be the end of the Communists. A pretty, youngish woman at Thomas's left put another layer of lipstick on her small mouth and between strokes said to her escort that she, at least, had a passport.

"Much good that will do you," the man at her side answered. "They are closing the border; haven't you heard?"

Her hand remained in mid-air.

Thomas sat stiffly aloof. Maybe he should have compassion for these people; after Villner's condemnation he really belonged with them. Nevertheless, he felt a closer affinity to Villner than to them. There was no chance of meeting Vlasta here; this would be the one place she'd keep away from. And the whole idea of dawdling away his time waiting for Elinor was fatuous. What could she tell him — to get out of her sight, and fast? Hadn't she warned him not to come crawling back to her, and wasn't this just what he was doing?

Lida had told him to go ask Elinor, if he wanted to know why Vlasta had left Rodnik. He had puzzled over this; it made no sense; but he might as well do it.

Thomas looked over the top of his paper toward the revolving door. He

had to keep this door in sight if he was to spot Elinor the moment she entered. He knew that whatever she might tell him about Vlasta would not bring him a single step further. He knew that he was running back to Mama because he was so utterly alone, and because somebody had to tell him that he was a great author with something important to say, and because her big bosom was the only place of rest he could think of. Out of the slim memory that had remained of her, he conjured up his mother, Anna Benda. She was leaning back in a large chair, a white blanket wrapped around her frail knees, her thin, lovely, sad face wasting away. He had sat in front of her, wanting to caress and to comfort her, but his hands had failed to obey him. And he had realized, then, that he would be without her, and that he would be lost. . . . There was no sense in being ashamed. People were on the march, he didn't know where to; pretenses no longer counted.

How long had he been waiting here, his eyes glued to the revolving door? The news vendor had come and gone several times, the lobby had become even more thickly populated, before Thomas saw the familiar energetic figure push through the door and stride to the desk.

He got up to go to her. But she was in company. Behind her, a whole clot of men had come in and surrounded her. Some of them were obviously reporters; others had the sleazy look of tipsters and stringers; and there were two or three young men, of impeccable dress, with the sober, discreet, and anemic smiles of junior diplomats.

Thomas held back. He despised this retinue which she always gathered and used to give herself background. But today, she seemed to be using them less than they were using her — the reporters asked questions of her, the informants were trying to get her ear, and the young diplomats stood correctly waiting their turn.

Almost everybody in the lobby was sensitive to any excitement, and she was aware that she held the center of attention. Thomas saw her face grow grave but confident; she lifted her head slightly, and he heard her say, "Gentlemen, if you'll come with me to my room — I'll tell you all I know."

With that, she took her key from the clerk and swept ahead of her train to the elevator. Thomas took the next car and reached her suite before the last of Elinor's flunkies had closed the door behind him.

Thomas remembered the chrysanthemum wallpaper and the couch. It was the same room in which he had forced open his gummy eyelids after that horrible night's binge, and in which she had served him the black coffee; the same room from which she had dragged him to Dr. Barsiny to sell his soul. He settled as far away from her as he could; she had seen him, all right, but did not let on. One of the young diplomats helped her out of her coat and stood next to her as she faced the group.

"Is it true that the President has granted you an interview?" a reporter inquired.

"The President," she said after half a second's thought, "is quite obviously interested in having his position understood by the American public."

"Can you let us know what you've been told by Foreign Minister Masaryk?"

"I have not yet been able to see him; but I will. He and I are very dear old friends, he used to practice piano in my house. I understand that Jan is terribly concerned by the present development, as any civilized democrat must be."

"Do you know whether he'll resign, too?"

"Resigning has become quite a habit within the Czech Cabinet, hasn't it?" she asked in answer.

There was some appreciative laughter.

"You've had lunch at the American Embassy, Miss Simpson. Have you been told anything about possible Marshall Plan aid for Czechoslovakia?"

"My dear young man! We had a tomato juice cocktail, shrimps à la Newburgh, roast beef with asparagus tips and French fried potatoes, and ice cream and coffee for dessert —"

Some of the tipsters swallowed hard.

"Beyond that, I'm afraid, everything about the luncheon is strictly secret. But you're an intelligent fellow. You ought to be able to figure out for yourself that the United States Congress would raise the roof off the Capitol if any of our nice, solid dollars were used to back up your Mr. Gottwald."

"And if the Prime Minister were replaced?"

"No comment."

There was again some laughter. The junior diplomat frowned.

"What do *you* think of the situation, Miss Simpson?"

"I'm an American newspaper woman. The internal affairs of your country —"

"Off the record, Miss Simpson, off the record!"

"Off the record, it is my considered opinion that unless the Soviets move a couple of their divisions to your borders—or across your borders—your Communists will get the licking of their lives."

The junior diplomat nodded seriously.

"Your friend, Deputy Benda, has not been seen in Prague for quite a few days. Is it true that he has killed himself?"

Elinor shot a quick glance at Thomas. "I know the Deputy only slightly, very slightly, and only through his brother, the well-known writer. . . . Thomas! Would you mind answering the question?"

Everybody turned to him. Thomas shrank. The thought of the possibility of his brother's suicide, of suicide at all, made his nerves grow numb.

And yet it was such a logical thought — put an end to it, stop wiggling like a worm on the hook, have peace, black, velvety peace . . .

"This is Mr. Thomas Benda!" Elinor's words came to him as through cotton.

"When I was home — yesterday — " he stammered. Then he began to laugh. "My brother Joseph — he's going to outlast us all!"

"Thank you, Mr. Benda."

"I think this is about enough," suggested Elinor.

The reporters trooped off, and she went into a session with her informants.

The Communists were going to resign. The Communists were not going to resign but were proclaiming the dictatorship of the proletariat. The Social-Democratic Ministers wanted to resign, but there was a fight in the Executive of their Party. One of their Ministers had been hit over the head by the Chairman of the Party. It was the Chairman who had been hit. The Minister of Justice, who had accused the Communists of plotting an armed *Putsch*, had been arrested. No: they had wanted to arrest him, but he had been carried into his office on the shoulders of two hundred loyal followers. The students were in open revolt and planned to march to the President's Palace on Hradcany Hill to defend Benes with their lives. Minister Dolezhal had conceived the resignation as a great coup, at a dinner of his intimate friends ten days ago. Some of the Ministers had learned only from the newspapers that they had resigned. In Slovakia, the peasants were arming themselves with pitchforks and marching on Bratislava. The Minister of National Defense was reliably reported to have said that he would refuse to obey orders if the President called out the Army. The Minister of National Defense was about to resign. There would be a workers' demonstration on Old Town Square. Dolezhal's Party would organize a counterdemonstration, and things would get hectic. There were armed cells of Dolezhal's followers all over Prague. The Workers' Militia in the factories was being issued guns, and would try to occupy all public buildings. Zorin, the Russian Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs, was in Prague, and Communist heads would be rolling soon; in fact, the Communists had precipitated the whole thing to save themselves from the wrath of the Kremlin.

Elinor sat, chain smoking through her black-and-gold holder, trying to sift rumor from fact, fact from conjecture, conjecture from wishful thinking. She took no notes; her mind was attuned to the pitiful creatures who outdid each other to help her, because all of them felt that, pretty soon, they might need her help. She was enjoying herself. In this milieu, she was able to create the impression — and to believe, herself — that history was not being made on the streets and in the factories of the country, in the

caucus rooms and meeting halls of the political parties, in the Ministerial offices and in the Presidential Palace, but right here, in the suite of Elinor Simpson, who had come to save poor little Czechoslovakia.

The diplomats, meanwhile, had separated themselves from the circle around Elinor and were developing their own theories. They talked of the relative strength of the forces, they compared percentages from the 1946 elections; they added the *imponderabilia* of the intrigues known only to them, and came up with a quite hopeful estimate, whereby they carefully allowed for the possibility of the contrary.

When the tipsters and stringers had been assured of Elinor's continuing esteem and had moved off, the diplomats joined her. For a while, they maintained the serious vein of their trade talk in which she was just as expert as she was in the throwing of hints to eager newsmen or in the sifting of the material her informants submitted. Then the conversation shifted to the latest gossip about the wives and daughters of native and foreign dignitaries, and after that, the diplomats took their leave, being careful to avoid any knowing glances at Thomas in his corner.

"Well," said Elinor, "a hard day."

She took a pill out of her enameled box and swallowed it, twisting her face.

"Come out of your corner." She thumped her hand on the couch and made room for him.

He sat down, but his manner showed that he was ready to jump at the slightest sign of animosity. He felt exhausted and yet keyed to a pitch, like a gambler at the tail end of his evening.

"What do you know about Vlasta?" he said, jerking out each of his words.

"Vlasta? . . . Oh, your little schoolteacher! What about her?"

"She's gone. She's left Rodnik. I don't know where she is."

Elinor raised her brows. "So she has gone!" A flush of triumph worked its way to her face, but she suppressed it. It was a grand day after all; she was going great guns, she was directing lives on every level. "Well, Thomas," she said, "have you thanked your God properly?"

"You must hate me very much. I understand it. I'm sorry." He rose and went to the chair on which he had dumped his hat and his coat.

"Don't leave yet!" she ordered.

He stood, undecided.

"I don't hate you." This was her moment. This would make up for all she had suffered in the past, the humiliations, the face of age that had stared at her from the mirror. "You've tried to throw me over more than once. You've always come creeping back. There must be reasons for that, Thomas; have you ever thought of them? Between you and me are ties

stronger than the hoops a wife slings over her husband, or some young filly over her boy-friend. . . . And you know it."

"I've come to ask you about Vlasta. Lida said —"

"All in its own good time, Thomas! Her troubles aren't what's upsetting you — you've always looked at life only as it affects you. It's you who are troubled."

True, he admitted to himself. But she hadn't yet told him to get out of her sight. In a way, he was grateful.

"Tell me," she urged. "Tell me what has brought you back to me."

He gripped the back of a chair and half-leaned over it. "Everything's gone wrong," he said dully. "I feel like a human punching bag that's been pummeled until its sides have split and its stuffing oozes out. I'm either ahead of or behind my time. I don't know which. I used to have roots in my country; I came back and the soil had changed. There were years when I was close to my brothers and worked with them and felt with them and fought alongside them: now they've fallen out and grown away from me, or I have grown away from them, God knows. I still have a wife, and I've made her unhappy; can I help it if she's turned into a fixture that gets on my nerves? Once I had pride and what I wrote was read and believed in — and now? Where do I belong? This noon, on the square, the people were singing our National Anthem. It starts with a question: *Where is my home?* . . . Where is it, Elinor?"

Here, she wanted to say, with me! She was made of flesh and blood. She wanted to spread her arms and ask him to come to her, she wanted to be mother and sweetheart and all he needed — but she controlled herself. He was groggy, now, but was he pliable? He was the only man who had managed to use her: he had taken her idea of freedom and written a parody on it; he had trampled on her heart whenever she'd been foolish enough to show it to him; he had turned from Kitty to Stanek to Vlasta in the steady effort of shutting her out; and finally he had flaunted his spite and told her openly to step out of his life. What did he think she was made of — rope, like a foot mat?

She cultivated the little flame of anger in her until it rose steeply; the memories she called on served a purpose, they helped her to remain level-headed and to stop her sentiments from flooding her like the ripples of a brook washing over a cast-off old tin can and sinking it. And what angered her most of all was the fact that she was forced to dig up the memories and to think, think, think, instead of letting herself go, drinking the moment down to its last dregs.

"I can't say that you don't deserve what you got. Thomas. Do you know what's going on out there? There's a battle on, and everything you and I ever wanted is being fought over."

"Yes," he said. "I know. But —"

"No *but*s any more. You can't come to me and simply declare bankruptcy and expect to be mothered and to get away without paying at least ten cents on the dollar!"

He smiled, "I'm afraid I haven't even got that much."

"We'll soon see," she said. She stepped to the window and opened it. The smoke left by her guests drifted out, and from Wenceslas Square, half a block away, came the muffled noise of the crowds.

Softly, she closed the window. "Sit down, Thomas." Softly she spoke, "The freedom you wrote for when you were in America, the freedom that you were supposed to write for in your new book, the freedom that permitted you to write at all — that freedom will be choked by tomorrow or day after tomorrow unless Dolezhal wins."

He saw himself shuttling from one side of Wenceslas Square to the other, from one contradictory slogan to the other. Everybody, including Elinor, talked of freedom, and nobody knew what it was.

Her eyes shone as she came over to him. "You ask me where you belong. . . . As if you didn't know!"

"Elinor!" he pleaded. "I beg of you, don't try to push me again —"

"But I must!" she said, almost regretfully. "Today may be the last time I can do it, the last time when pushing you anywhere makes any sense. You have a terrible responsibility, Thomas. You're a great writer!"

Thomas looked up at her. *A great writer* — that's what he had come to hear. She must have sensed what he had wanted. She was assuring him — and coupling her assurance with new demands.

"I can only write the truth as I see it," he defended himself.

"The truth — as in your essay? Where you counted the pimples on the face of our democracy and insisted on calling them cancers? There are only two kinds of people, those like us, and the others who want to take away what we have. You feel homeless because you've betrayed us —"

She shrugged.

"I betrayed you . . ." he said quietly.

"I mean, objectively speaking —"

"A traitor . . ."

"Yes."

He sat silent. Villner, too, had accused him of treason. Maybe both of them were justified, objectively speaking. But if they were, he wanted no part of the whole thing.

"Do you have any idea of what happened to Vlasta?" he asked.

"Vlasta . . . !" She waved away his question. "Outside, our world is burning — and you want Vlasta. Go out there, stand where you belong, and fight!"

He saw the red splotches on her face.

"It's not too late yet," she said tensely. "The Essay has not been printed; you can still speak! Forget about Vlasta, forget about Kitty, all the weights that hold you down. There's a part for you in what's unrolling itself out there, a big and important part, perhaps a decisive one."

He felt her eyes bore into him, her hands clasping his shoulders.

"I can call up Dolezhal, tell him you want to publish an appeal through the papers —"

She noticed his stiffening.

"Oh, don't be worried. If things go wrong, I'll get you out. You'll come with me."

She sat down next to him. He smelled her perfume and the warmth of her body.

"You and I . . ." she said. "I'll make life wonderful for you, exciting. . . . Think what we can mean to one another. You will create . . ."

Another thought entered her mind.

"And if you're concerned about your country, you can help it best by doing what you did before. You'll be the Spokesman again, and when you return next time. . . ."

She went on talking. She worked out his whole future, but the picture she drew blurred in the face of the one he saw. He suddenly knew who would win the battle, and he knew there would be no return for him once he crossed the borders. He saw himself ten years from now, still tagging after an aged Elinor, kept in bondage by her like the potential traitor he was, giving stupid little lectures before stupid little women's clubs in stupid little American towns.

"Well?" she said. "Why don't you answer?"

"What have you done to Vlasta?"

She drew away from him, and asked bitingly, "Is that all you have to say?"

"Yes."

"I'll say good-by to you now, Thomas. I probably won't be in Prague much longer."

"About Vlasta!" he insisted.

"Go find her," she said. "What a joke! But it fits in with all you are and have ever done. Thomas Benda, of uncertain mind, chasing after a woman of uncertain sex!"

She saw him pale. She saw on his face the slow succession of bewilderment, gradual understanding, and then the shock of comprehension. She gave him his coat and hat and opened the door for him.

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He crawled into his sagging hotel bed that smelled of some disinfectant. He wanted to sleep. He shivered, feverishly. He must sleep. He couldn't sleep.

It was a lie. A malicious, miserable lie such as only Elinor's mind could concoct. It was a lie, he repeated over and again, as if the words, in their monotony, could carry him off to sleep. It was a lie — except that it had the devil's own logic and answered questions which he had always blocked from his conscious mind.

He tossed and turned from side to side. The lights of a passing car flashed a weird design at the ceiling.

Never had a woman been wooed as Vlasta had been; never had a man offered as much and as generously of himself as he had; never had there been such self-effacing, patient, considerate devotion as he had shown; never had a woman been made to feel more deeply how much she was needed and how much she could give and mean — and all Vlasta had had eyes for was Petra.

He dug his head into the hot pillow. It was a lie! He had senses and nerves and a fine feeling for human qualities. And Vlasta was above reproach. A person could not be both evil and good, could not hide a sickness of this nature and at the same time be like an open book. Or could she?

Bedsprings creaked in the room next door. A church bell rang interminably, and there was the mad knocking of steam in the pipe.

Could she? It was a lie. . . .

He arose as beaten-up as he'd gone to bed. His muscles ached, and the gray, cheerless morning sat on his chest like a nightmare. Another day of search. He would have to go on searching until he found her or until he broke down. Obedient to his duty, he got into his clothes. He ate listlessly. The street pavement received his feet like prisoners brought back to jail. He commanded his legs to carry him on. He forced his lids to stay apart and his burning eyes to see. His tongue was thick and dry with the bitterness from his stomach, his face sagged numbly, his hands dragged in the pockets of his overcoat as something not his own.

There was no longer any resemblance to a plan in his search or in the thoughts that guided him. He kept on walking. He simply stumbled after the crowds, scanning faces, trying to discern outlines in the spare light of the morning. A wet, slushy snow began to fall, dimming everything. People were converging from many sides, moving in one direction, shuffling along slowly. They hung in dark clusters at the platforms of the plodding streetcars. They came packed on factory trucks whose wheels were muffled by the freshly fallen snow. The crooked alleys and passageways of the Old Town were like whispering tunnels, and here and there was the crying of a frightened child.

He stepped out of the shadows of the close-set houses; the whitish light over the open space of the Old Town Square blinded him momentarily. There were the jagged walls of the ruined City Hall; the baroque curves framing the square; the double-towered Tyn Church with the tiny subsidiary turrets pointing sharply up into the indefinite clouds; the giant statue of Jan Hus raising its hand in benediction or in warning, and beneath all that, immobile and yet with a motion of its own, swaying and rippling, a sea of faces.

The certainty that Vlasta would be there, in the mass, close but beyond his reach, unapproachable, filled him with nervous frustration. He was being jammed in by those who pressed from behind him onto the square. He could not move, he had become part of a tremendous body, a cell, a particle with no will or power of its own. He had to yield, and in yielding, he gradually felt the slackening of his tensions and a new kind of sensation — his eyes became the eyes of thousands, his heart began to beat with their beat, his feet stamped with theirs, and his breath was part of the thin vapor that rose from all the people.

The loud-speakers boomed, and a silver-haired man stood up on a platform. Something blinked in his hand — he was waving his pince-nez.

"The Ministers who tendered their resignation yesterday," said Stanek, "had formed a reactionary bloc within the Cabinet. Month after month, they prevented all constructive work in fulfillment of the Government program to which all political parties had pledged themselves. . . ."

"Throw them out!" shouted the people.

Thomas twisted his head. He saw the standards of the trade unions, the red-and-gold flags of the Communists, and white streamers with hastily painted slogans.

"They sabotaged the Constitution!" The voice came through again. "They wanted to block our national social insurance, our land reform, our nationalization, our Two-Year Plan! They want to split the people and break up the National Front and break up the Government . . ."

"Throw them out!" the cries rose again, coming from everywhere, joining, angry, threatening. "Traitors!"

The old man waved his hand for quiet. "They have resigned!" The high pitch of his voice was carried by the amplifiers. "They have spoken their own judgment! The people of this country, rising like one man to defend their democracy, their freedom —"

"Long live freedom!" roared the square.

"The people demand that the resignation be accepted and that the wreckers of the people's democracy be retired."

"Down with the traitors!" cried a voice, and its echo was taken up and

it kept swelling. The banners stirred, and the snow came down in big, slow flakes.

"Down with the traitors!" Thomas found himself shouting, too.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THIS SUNDAY morning, the Reverend Antonin Trnka had chosen as his text 1 Corinthians, 13, 2: *And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing.*

He had chosen this because he was sorely troubled. The people he had preached to and known for so many years were arrogating to themselves the knowledge of how the world functioned and the gift of prophecy on their own futures; mysteries no longer existed for them; and they believed firmly that they could move mountains—but he was afraid that in the process much of what he liked and had come to see as necessary, and part of a firmly established order, would be buried under the upheaved boulders of this earthquake.

There was nothing he could do without creating ill will against himself, except to appeal to the Christian virtues of his people, and to attempt to stay their rash hand by laying into their hearts the seed of charity; for he who believed in charity would hesitate to jump at his brother's throat.

How many changes he had seen in his life! An empire gone, two revolutions, war, and occupation; but this was somehow more cataclysmic, more frightening, because it did not come from the outside. It came from within, and yet was beyond his reach.

So he stood there on the pulpit, his hands extended, his voice shaking. "Charity!" he said. "Who can claim that he has committed no sin? Who dares to throw the first stone? And dare we pile up new sins in trying to even the score of old ones? We must forgive—and love one another. . . ."

Joseph sat in his pew with Lida and Petra. The parson's words were like a mild rain on the parched sand of his heart and soothed the burning of his fears. Joseph was deeply grateful; he was very much in need of charity and forgiveness, and he hoped that the sermon would have some influence on Trnka's parishioners.

He folded his hands and stared at his large-boned fingers. Things had come to a sorry pass when you had to rely on God and the eloquence of a preacher. . . . Joseph's first twenty-four hours after the announcement

of the resignation of Dolezhal and the others had been filled with hope and jubilant excitement; he had cracked good-natured jokes at Lida's insane urge to be ready and packed; he had designed a new and attractive prospectus for Vesely's; he had played five sets of Ping-pong with Petra, and on Friday evening he had got himself gloriously drunk singing a great number of war songs, in Czech and in English. He had fallen into bed muttering that he was going back to Prague to place himself at Dolezhal's disposal.

He thought he could guess at Dolezhal's schedule; but after the first twenty-four hours things stopped going on schedule. The workers' demonstration on Old Town Square in Prague ought to have been followed by an even mightier counterdemonstration, by a whole wave, all over the country. Nothing had happened. The tradesmen, the businessmen, the house owners, the bakers, the butchers, the shoemakers, the *rentiers* — all the small independent people who were the strength of Dolezhal's Party and whose very independence would be wiped out — were staying home, as if paralyzed, behind tightly drawn curtains. Nothing stirred in the police force, which should have risen against the ruthless rule of the Minister of Interior; the Army generals and colonels and majors, most of whom had been outspoken in their anti-Communist leanings, remained silent; no lieutenant with ten men appeared at any public building to throw out the socializers; there was a rumor that a couple of captains had tried to take the studios of Radio Prague, but the radio continued its staid, unexcited announcements with quiet persistence.

By Saturday night, all of Joseph's hopes were ended. Despite his foul mood, he kept his mind clear and saw that the tables had been turned completely. Dolezhal and his colleagues had not resigned for the purpose of renouncing their power; the resignation was to have catapulted them into complete command. But the rump Government, apparently backed by the majority of the workers and the unions, had taken them at their word — *You've resigned? Fine! Now stay out!* — and those God-damned workers took up the demand wherever you looked in the country; they were the only ones who had come out fighting; they were forming action committees and were acting as if every follower of Dolezhal had resigned, too. More, they had begun to remove from his position anyone they didn't like or trust. The one force that still prevented a rout was the frail little President, who was refusing to accept the resignations and had retreated to his country home. But how long could he go on playing ostrich?

"Let us pray. . . ." said the Reverend Trnka.

Joseph bent his stubborn head. He prayed to the Lord for mercy in this adversity, and for protection against the mischief of his enemies; he thanked God devoutly for having counseled him to stay in Rodnik so that he could

not be implicated in the events, and he promised to humble himself forever and abandon all ambition if, in His infinite wisdom, God should see fit to seal the lips of Dolezhal and of Duchinsky in all matters pertaining to His crushed and penitent servant, Joseph Benda.

"Amen!" called the Reverend Trnka.

Joseph felt cleansed. He carried his head high as he left the church and stepped out on the Market Square. He had put his problem squarely to a Higher Power, and he believed he had obligated that Power sufficiently to bring down Its weight on his side.

Most of the people went directly from church to the auditorium. The hall was already crowded when the worshipers arrived. It was an emergency meeting for which the call had gone out the night before. There had been no time for banners and streamers; the bare rafters of the ceiling, the whitewashed walls, provided a stark background for the tense faces that extended from the platform to the rearmost corners.

To Karel, who knew the faces of his people, there was something exhilarating in the anger stamped on them; it was the anger he had seen in Buchenwald on the day of liberation, when the prisoners took over and the guards became prisoners. It was so different from the genial mood of the election shindig; but different, too, from the anarchic fury after the fire at the Hammer Works, which had nearly led to a physical assault on Joseph. It was as if these men and women had matured; for a certain amount of maturity was needed to enable simple people to see the danger to all of them in what had started out as a remote cabinet crisis in Prague.

His eyes swept along the dense rows. He knew whose stomach was ailing and whose lungs were scarred, who was dying and who was bringing a new life into this world. He had been with them in the bright light of day, moving his hand across pupils opaque with glass blower's cataract, and at night, at the glowing fire of a stove on which simmered a pot of hot water to boil his instruments. And yet, today, they were like a new people to him.

Kravat was speaking. His long, horsy features were set, his voice determined. He summarized what had occurred in the capital; he explained the forces that were on the move; he pointed out what was at stake; he called on the people to decide, here and now, as to where they belonged.

There can be no doubt about where I belong in this hour, thought Karel. He was no specialist in political analyses, no pundit; neither were the people. The charting of developments he had to leave to the professionals; but he had seen the oncoming clash with the cleavage in his own family and with the fight over control of the Benda Works. With the resignations in Prague, Joseph's resignation as National Administrator fell into

its proper perspective, and so did the hypertension of his nerves. Here also lay the explanation to Barsiny's refusal to print Thomas's book; everything, from Kitty's unhappiness to Petra's idolization of Vlasta, had its roots in the titanic struggle that was now breaking into the open. And suddenly he understood the anger of the people — not as a political phenomenon, but as something deeply human. They, too, each in his own way, had been affected. The way the bacilli traveled through stomach and lungs, the forms which birth and death took, the blindness in the sun and the hurry call at night, family relations and nerves, what kind of food was served and what words were spoken over the supper table, and the bed you slept in and the pictures on your wall — nothing, nothing stood by itself, or could be considered outside of this struggle. But he wanted stomachs and lungs to stay healthy; he wanted men to keep the light of their eyes; he wanted families to stay together and nerves to be able to do their duty; meat on the table and people talking to each other without rancor; clean, decent beds and houses; Van Gogh's sunflowers instead of the cheap, gilded print of some saint or other — he wanted this struggle to end; he wanted sanity and work that was meaningful, and some measure of happiness for himself and for the others.

"So I propose," Kravat was saying, "that as other cities have done, we in Rodnik also nominate an action committee to safeguard the people's property and our democratic institutions. This committee should be composed of representatives of all political parties, and even those who do not belong to any party. It should be composed of men and women whom we know and who by their work and their standing in the community have proved that they are capable of defending the interests of the people, of cleaning out the strongholds from where the predatory attack was launched against our achievements."

Karel listened to the applause. It was strong and even, but businesslike, too, and it stopped the moment Kravat's short gesture cut it off.

"There is work to be done," Kravat said, "and no time to be lost. Nominations!"

Kravat was named, and Viteslav Czerny, the team master who once had voted for Joseph Benda. Then somebody called, "Dr. Karel Benda!"

Karel had been prepared to support the Action Committee and to go along with its decisions. Though on another level, this was very much like the time when the people prepared for defense against the Nazis; a new authority was emerging from the people, and whoever sided with the people had to follow it. But he had not expected that they would want him to be part of the new authority. And was he ready not only to accept orders but also to help rule on what orders should be given?

"We all know Karel Benda!" he heard Kravat say. "He's fought in the

underground with us, he's been in concentration camp, he's worked alongside us on brigades; and as our doctor, he has filled a place where he was bitterly needed. We've had our differences of opinion—but he is here today, with us. Well, Karel—do you accept? Do you accept although we may have to take measures that could be painful to you, personally?"

There was none of the usual humor in the wrinkles around Kravat's eyes. Kravat had been extremely fair; he had left the door open for an honorable retreat. Perhaps, too, he feared that Karel might be too soft for service on the Committee.

Karel felt the people turn toward him, he felt their expectancy and, as he wavered, he saw the expectancy change to doubt and vexation.

"I accept," he said.

The hands went up. The vote was unanimous.

Karel stacked his few supper dishes. The Committee had spent all afternoon debating the concrete effect of the Prague events on the situation in Rodnik. The discussion had been neither pleasant nor smooth, temperaments and attitudes had clashed over what steps were to be taken first and what could be delayed, who could be relied on and who, at least for the time being, had to be removed from key positions. But there had been no argument over what was to be done with Joseph Benda; only firm *Ayes* to Kravat's terse, plain proposal. Karel's *Aye* had been as clear as the other men's, and it had sobered him. After that, he had not contributed to the suggestions that were being kicked around—the necessary business of evolving an emergency government and of applying the new power suddenly became nerve-racking and filled with picayune detail.

When the Committee had finally finished deciding on its policies, he had gone home. Much as he tried to divert it, his mind kept buzzing around his problems like a fat green fly around a dung heap. Though he had said "*Aye!*" he felt the decision had been something apart from him, as had so many others in recent months. There was a momentum outside of him which was greater than his own. If it would only stop and give him a pause, a chance to catch up!

A man can go on by himself for just so long. He had come to the point where he needed Kitty. When the bell sounded into the half-tints of his thoughts, and when he found Kitty standing at the door, he was hardly surprised.

"I was thinking of you," he said, and took her hand and led her into his flat.

"You were?" she asked with exaggerated brightness.

"My God!" he said, "what's happened?" She was wearing a deeply cut, V-necked, clinging dress; her face was rouged, her eyelids shaded bluishly,

her lashes mascaraed; but even the careful brushing of her hair had failed to give it luster. Her getup was like a coat of paint over a staggering grief.

"Thomas has left me," she said. "So here I am."

She's ill, he thought, and checked himself from reaching for her pulse. She's ill. . . . He frowned. How long had he waited for this, for her to come to him, and for the news: *Thomas has left me* — and Dr. Benda was ready with his pills!

"He pretended he was going to Prague to ask Villner about the Essay; but he really went after Vlasta. . . ." She slumped into the big chair and looked at him from feverish eyes. "I don't know any more. I've reached the end."

He started to say something; but she began to laugh, "Shall I wear a bell on my forehead and cry, *Unclean?* My husband has left me, you've kept away from me —" She stood up. "Tell me, Karel — I'm not ugly, am I? I'm young and healthy. I'm a desirable woman, wouldn't you say?" She began to walk up and down, turning slowly. "I can cook, sew, keep house. I talk just as intelligently as the next one. I have breasts, hips, legs . . ."

All he would have to do was to carry her to his bed. "Kitty," he said, "you know that I think you're the most beautiful, the loveliest woman on earth."

"I know." She fell back on the chair and lowered her head. Her shoulders shook.

"And you know, too," he went on, "that every day away from you had more hours than I thought a day could ever have."

She nodded obediently.

"I want you, Kitty. The other day, up at your house —" he broke off.

"I am free," she said.

"Are you?"

He caressed her hair. He loved her so much. And he told himself in the most explicit terms possible that, because he loved her so much, and because he needed her so much, the cut from Thomas would have to be clean; no pus, no raw edges, a perfect suture, even if the pain of it seemed to rise beyond endurance.

"Thomas will be back," he said. "And then?"

Her tear-stained face came up. He wiped off the black traces of the mascara which had run down from her eyes. "Yes," she said, "he may come back. I learned today, from Lida, what was the matter with Vlasta. She's a Lesbian."

Karel stood quite still. He thought of the night Vlasta and Petra and Thomas had come to his flat. He thought of the silver heart with the petrified piece of chewed bread inside. The unrobed nun, he thought.

As if Kitty, too, had her doubts, she said, "Lida told me Elinor Simpson discovered it. . . ."

The abysmal, vicious stupidity of these small-minded burghers! And what they must have done to Petra, taking away from her the one person she loved and who gave her security! . . . "And you believed it, Kitty?" he asked.

"I don't know," she said. "I don't know what to believe — about anything."

Her bewilderment tore at him. If she accepted Lida's and Elinor's wisdom at face value, she had to assume that Thomas would come back to her more ill and more useless than ever. Where did that put her? Would she be able to say to Thomas: *It's time you learned about reality; I'm sick of being the buffer between you and the world* — could she do that to him?

"I'm afraid," he said, "Lida hasn't the faintest idea of what homosexuality is and where to find it and how it manifests itself. No doubt, Elinor has more experience — but she'll be as superficial in sexology as in politics."

"Do you think, then — it is possible that Thomas — and Vlasta . . ." She halted. Then she said firmly, "I want him to be happy. That's all I want for him."

He did not answer. Perhaps it was better to let matters rest and not to parade before her what he knew and could diagnose or guess at.

"I loved Thomas as you love a helpless child," she smiled sadly. "I've had to learn. It isn't enough for a whole life. But you — I could curl up in your vest pocket if you wanted to bother with carrying me along."

The temptation, now, was greater than when she had preened herself before him. All he would have to do was to say *Yes*.

But he said *No*, and the frustration of it sat on his shoulders like Sinbad's old man, heavy and choking. He bore it; not for the good of Thomas — that consideration was no longer valid — but for Kitty's sake and his own, and perhaps because of his cursed compulsion toward the remnants of his integrity.

"If Thomas should meet up with Vlasta," he stated harshly, "he'll come back defeated. He'll come back feeling that he's a failure as a man."

Or he won't come back, he added to himself, and we'll find him in the morgue.

After a while, she said, "But you told me Vlasta was not —"

"Kitty! You and I and Vlasta and Thomas, even Lida and Joseph — we've all been branded by this war. The brand is different on each of us, but it was the same ugly flame. It destroyed your marriage. In Vlasta, it destroyed something which may be repaired by time, or by the right kind of man. Thomas isn't that man."

"Yes," she said, "I understand. I should never have let him go to Prague without me."

There it was, the whole picture, and the irony of it. A cut had to be made, and it had to be made clean, and he stood at the operating table and didn't know where to start cutting. Wherever he started, it would end up with Kitty and himself going through the rest of their lives sick with guilt. If only there was some way of getting hold of Thomas and grabbing him by the collar, of forcing him to grow up, of stopping him from using his weakness as the suction cup with which he leeches on Kitty!

She looked at her watch. "We still can make the evening train to Prague. We can see Thomas and bring him back and make him well and then —"

"You'll be free." He said it for her . . . and knew there was no telling when Thomas ever would be well enough.

"Please, come with me," she urged.

"There's nothing I'd rather do." His voice grated.

"You're not angry at me? I can't do it by myself. I couldn't face him alone."

He ran his hand over his forehead. The evening train would be half-empty. They would have a compartment to themselves. "I was elected to the Action Committee," he said. "I have to stay here."

The rouge on her face made it appear masklike.

Kravat was perfectly capable of handling the situation in Rodnik, he argued with himself. . . . "You have your duty, Kitty. I have mine. If you want to go now, you'll have to go alone."

The mask lost its rigidity, her face seemed to shrink.

The likelihood was that they wouldn't be able to find Thomas that late in the evening. They would stay over in a hotel, they would have a whole night. . . . "It isn't just belonging to the Committee," he said. "It's what the Committee will have to do, tomorrow."

"If you love me at all, Karel —"

"You've got to trust me," he pleaded. "This once, Kitty, you've got to."

It was more than a test: it was a whole future in balance, hers and his. If she had no confidence in him, nothing would remain to be salvaged out of the old life of the Bendas.

Her fingers groped along the doilies on the armrest. Then her eyes sought his, and she said, "I'll wait."

Outwardly, Monday morning in Rodnik looked like the beginning of any ordinary week. Having tramped through the darkness over the creaking snow, the glassworkers started on their accustomed routine at the furnace or at the grinding wheel at five o'clock sharp, as always. Perhaps there was a little more tension than on other days, the early morning curtness

was a little less pronounced, and a few questions were asked about those who were missing because they had been elected yesterday to the Action Committee. But after half an hour the flurry had died down, and people were fully immersed in sweating out their work and earning their bread.

Daylight brought the newspapers from the district town of Limberk. Some changes must have taken place there, because the one paper which as late as Saturday had loudly supported Dolezhal's stand was conspicuously silent on the resignation issue. In the dispensary of the Benda Works, Karel looked over the news. The Congress of Works Councils had met in Prague over Sunday and had passed a resolution demanding the nationalization of all enterprises employing more than fifty workers. The resolution stated that private enterprise had become a breeding ground of economic and political intrigues and had swallowed up billions of profits at a time of harvest failure and general poverty. The paper reported a call from the Central Headquarters of the trade unions for a one-hour general strike on Tuesday at noon. They were putting on the heat, thought Karel; if the strike demonstration came off solidly, it might convince the President to accept the resignation of the twelve Ministers and to end the legalistic deadlock. Then there were a great number of scattered items about action committees springing up in Limberk and in various communities of the district, but very little about what these committees had done, how they were being received, and how successful they had been.

With a sigh, he folded the paper, shoved it into his pocket, and went to the door to admit the next patient. But the door was opened from the outside by the flat-chested, timid creature who had been Joseph's secretary.

"Mr. Kravat asks," she said hastily, without looking at Karel, "if you could come to his office." And before Karel could question her, she had run off.

"I'm sorry," he explained to the two sick men waiting for him in the corridor. "This seems to be an emergency. You'll have to see me when I come back."

He took off his white coat and threw it over the back of his chair. He slipped on his jacket and reached for his overcoat and hat — and stopped. He had to sit down. Shaking his head, he leaned back and closed his eyes. Against the black inside of his lids, red and golden circles were whirring with great speed; his breath came in gasps; his hands were icy cold. After taking Kitty home, he'd had all night and all morning to prepare himself; he had chosen to shut the whole matter out of his mind; but now that the Committee's decision had to be acted on, his heart, so nicely recovered and serviceable, caught up with him.

When his breath came more easily and the sharply colored whirring circles had changed to a slowly dancing, pale pattern, he opened his eyes

and got up heavily. He poured himself a glass of water and drank it in careful sips; then he left the dispensary and, setting his feet firmly, walked over to Kravat's office.

The office was as it had been in Joseph's time, except that the large portrait of Peter Benda had been replaced by a white board with a network of squares, on which green and orange columns illustrated production and sales of the Benda Works. Kravat, wearing high boots, a much-used leather jacket, and a blue cap with a cracked shield, leaned against what had been Joseph's desk; he was surrounded by most of the members of the Committee. "Good morning, Karel!" he said. "Come in!"

His cheerful tone was not quite genuine. Karel noticed the frown as Kravat stepped out of the group and came toward him and took him by the elbow. "You don't have to come along," Kravat said gently. "It won't do anyone any good, it's unnecessary, and we can deal with the thing just as well without you —"

Karel replied loudly, "I believe I told you already — either I am in this the whole way or not at all. Take your choice."

Kravat shrugged and hooked the thumbs of his strong, hairy hands in his belt. "All right! Then let's all go."

The Committee trooped out of the office. They crossed the yard of the Works, stumbling over the rutted ground, slipping on the ice. The sun, crawling up through the gap between Mount St. Peter and Mount St. Anna, cast its feeble rays on a pile of discarded overlay vases. The pinks and blues of their inner glass shone through the white outer layer; the snow frozen on top of them added its own brilliant reflection to the work of man. Black and sharply etched against the still wintry air, the men marched in loose file onto the bridge over the Suska River; looking neither right at the small houses lining its bank and wafting shimmering clouds of thin smoke to the sky, nor left at the trickle of dark water sluggishly fighting its way between promontories of ice, they strode forward, into the town. The silence was broken only by short appeals to the Saints, or the Devil, when the sole of someone's foot failed to grip and the man slid back on the uphill road.

Where the road straightened stood the old-fashioned three-storied house with its black-shingled roof and the gold-painted sign running underneath the center windows of the second floor: *Vesely's Cut Glass*. A brass handle was suspended from a wire leading to a bell. Kravat walked up to the stoop in front of the door and pulled the handle. The bell tinkled thinly.

There was no immediate answer. Kravat pressed the doorknob; the door swung easily; a cold dim hallway, its tiled floor muddied with melted snow, yawned in their faces. Kravat cleaned his boots thoroughly on the wet foot-mat beyond the sill; the other men followed his example; with

Karel bringing up the rear, they finally groped to the end of the corridor, to another door through which the clacking of a typewriter could be heard.

They were in the anteroom to Lida's office. The girl at the typewriter let her hands drop from the keys. The men shuffled past her to the door marked *Private*. Kravat knocked.

"Enter!" said a man's voice.

Karel did not recognize it, although it was Joseph's. Joseph stood with his back to the potbelled stove, his broad face creased in a pleasant smile, his hands hidden in the pockets of his pants. Lida was settled behind her desk; but its top was bare, and it was clear that neither of them had done any work this morning. They had been waiting.

"Mr. Kravat!" said Joseph, "Karel! And you, gentlemen! Good morning!"

The men of the Committee had taken off their caps and hats and were huddling just inside the door.

"I regret we don't have enough chairs for so large an invasion," said Joseph. His voice was weary, but he was obviously determined to carry this through in good form.

"Good morning, Mr. Benda, and Mrs. Benda," said Kravat. "We can stand. We won't take much of your time."

"I can have some benches brought in," suggested Lida.

"Thank you, madame, it won't be necessary."

She was staring at Karel out of a gray face. Her bone structure stuck out; her eyes, her temples, her cheeks had caved in like the earth on top of an old mine. Karel felt the tragedy of this face deeply. He had never liked her very much; she had been too grasping, too self-centered, too smug; but had she deserved what now was coming to her?

"I am glad that the two of you are here," Kravat was saying. "Though Vesely's is owned by you, madame, your husband, naturally, has a certain interest in the enterprise."

"What do you want?" Joseph said gruffly. "Come to the point."

"I will," said Kravat. He had opened his leather jacket and was moving forward, into the center of the room. "My friends and I have been named by the people of Rodnik as an Action Committee to safeguard the property of the people and to take the necessary steps in the protection of our People's Democratic Republic."

"My brother Karel, too?" asked Joseph.

"Dr. Karel Benda is a member of the Action Committee," confirmed Kravat.

"Is that so!" Joseph said. "I thought you brought the doctor along in case something happened."

Kravat scratched his head. "Frankly, Mr. Benda, I don't expect we'll need medical aid."

Joseph was still standing close to the stove. He must be getting uncomfortably warm—it went through Karel's mind—and he wondered at the ridiculous things people think of at such moments. Then he saw the heavy poker in the coalbin at Joseph's feet. Joseph wasn't going to run amuck . . . ?

"Let's get this over with!" a man was grumbling behind Kravat. "We haven't got all day —"

"Yes," said Joseph, "let's get this over with. Vesely's is not property of the people, neither am I, nor my wife, a threat to what you call the People's Democratic Republic."

Kravat looked at him and slowly shook his head. "You're wrong," he said; and, turning to Lida, "Madame, if you'll kindly hand over the keys to your safe and to the office files . . . As of now, and until we receive further directives, Vesely's Cut Glass is property of the people."

Joseph took his hands out of his pockets. Involuntarily, they formed into fists. "By what authority, Mr. Kravat?"

"By authority of the people, by authority of the Action Committee."

"And if I don't recognize this authority?"

"Don't be a fool, Joseph!" said Karel.

"You keep out of this!" Joseph's eyes stung with hate. His shoulders were hunched bullishly as he advanced from the stove and pushed up against Kravat. "We have a President! We have courts of law! We have a Parliament, of which I am a member! To hell with your authority!"

For seconds on end, nobody said a word. The fire crackled in the stove, a burned-out piece of coal fell through the grate, and the muffled thump made Karel start.

Then Kravat said quietly: "Mr. Benda, you've always been slow to understand the changes that have taken place. Your time is up—you can scream against it as much as you want. This is not a personal thing. Vesely's Cut Glass was not built by your wife's father; it was built out of the labor and the blood of the glass grinders he hired, men like Blaha—you remember. We're only taking back what belongs to us. And if you resist, we'll take it anyhow. We don't like to use force, but we can."

Joseph was ashen. "You've taken my Works. You've already taken all I lived for. . . . Why do you want to take this one little refinery, too—the only thing we've got left? Do you want to starve me and my family? Or what?"

Karel saw again his brother's naked, shivering, scared skin as he had seen it when he'd examined him. The people were so numerous, so big,

so powerful — why weren't they magnanimous, why did they bother with an item like Vesely's?

"If you'll let us have the keys," said Kravat, "we can all have a look at your books and examine your profits and see how you've turned the home workers and the small refiners around here into your subcontractors, and bled them, and how you've monopolized the glass-grinding business in this area —"

"Thieves!" yelled Lida. "Crooks! Swine!" With catlike speed she had jumped up and thrown herself on the man nearest to her — Czerny, the little team master from Benda — and was hammering at him with her fists.

Karel tore her away. He gripped her arms, but she struggled on. Spittle stood between her gritted teeth, she was panting, and her strength multiplied as her last inhibitions vanished. She wrenched free one hand. Karel heard the rasp of her nails on his face, he felt the smart of pain, and the warmth of his blood trickling down his cheek.

"Judas!" she cried out. "Judas! Judas! Judas!"

He slapped her.

Her body grew limp and he caught it before it slipped to the floor.

"Here are the keys," said Joseph.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The tragedy of our time is that we are so deeply rooted in it. We line up in columns which none of us formed, we move under laws which none of us made, we are saddled with conflicts none of us started, we are the children of our fathers. No one of us is worse or better than the next man, who is a man of good will, too, but who must act according to the role into which birth, upbringing, inheritance, work habits, surroundings have cast him. How limited, then, becomes the freedom of decision remaining to the individual!

And yet, there comes in everyone's time the hour when he must decide for himself, the moment when circumstances and objective conditions and laws counterbalance each other, and when the scale is tipped by human will. And this is the moment by which we are judged. The Czech poet Otakar Brezina once wrote, "We feel that the day of judgment lies not in the future, but that it is the continuous present in the cosmos, that every hour is the judge of all hours, that each one of us is unwillingly the executor of justice in the life of the people."

When that hour comes, we are left suddenly naked. The rules of rou-

tine, the voices of teachers and friends, the sound of our fellow marchers' tramping feet have been stripped from us.

It is the summit of life, and death lurks over our shoulder. . . .

From THOMAS BENDA: *Essay on Freedom*

THE TRAIN stopped in the open country, just outside of Prague. In the gray distance, a factory whistle went off, its monotone like a dirge in the abrupt silence of the railroad wheels. The conductor, his shaggy fur collar pulled up, walked alongside the train with slow unconcern. The steam from the engine up front hissed white billows over the sooty snow through which the stubbles of last year's miserable harvest were showing.

The man in the black overcoat and the checkered shawl, who had sat tight-faced and wordless since entering the compartment, pulled down the window and leaned out, "Hey, what is it now? Another one of your strikes, like yesterday?"

"No, mister!" came the voice from outside. "Just waiting for the line to get clear."

Kitty shivered a little.

"Yesterday, we sat here for fully five minutes," the man with the checkered shawl explained, tugging at it. "Same identical spot. They should keep their hands off the railways. People have to get around, no?"

Karel closed the window.

"Pardon me," said the man, "it's just that you never know what will be next. Resignations, crises, strikes. In Prague, workers all over the streets. In front of public buildings, workers with armbands. Nothing but workers. What is this country coming to?"

The train jerked and rattled on.

"Maybe it's a workers' country?" asked Karel.

The man glowered, but did not reply. Then he unfolded a newspaper and buried himself behind it.

They set out to check the few hotels whose names Kitty had heard Thomas mention. The run-down Aurora in Vinohrady was the third one they investigated. Yes, Mr. Thomas Benda was registered, the clerk informed them, but he had gone out and had failed to leave word as to when he would return. Was there any message for him?

"No," said Kitty.

The clerk sauntered back to a ledger on which he had been working. Kitty turned to Karel with a half-helpless, half-apologetic smile.

He took her arm and pressed it tightly. "Part of our job is done. We know where to find him. He'll have to come back tonight sometime."

"But until then?"

"Let's go downtown," said Karel. From the moment he and Kitty had left Wilson Station, he had been swinging with his emotions, which furled themselves now around the problem he shared with her, and again around the swirl of events in Prague. "Come on, Kitty!" he urged.

Immediately, on stepping out of the hotel, they were back in the fever of the streets. The city teetered with uncertainty. Some people were clustering around newsstands, or under the loud-speakers mounted at strategic corners. Others seemed to drift in the general direction of Wenceslas Square. Most of them were not the kind of people usually found at this hour of day in this sedate section of the city: they were drably clothed; they bore the signs of poverty and hard work on their threadbare backs. They must have come from the working-class suburbs farther out; yet they moved with a slow, steady self-assurance, as if the broad streets belonged to them.

A man in a mackinaw, passing Karel and Kitty, said to two others with him, "There'll have to be an honest-to-goodness general strike yet. You wait and see. None of these one-hour businesses."

"No," said his companion, "it'll never come to that. Gottwald is talking with Benes now. What can they talk about? A new cabinet, of course —"

The third one added, "The President will accept the resignations. That's as sure as the Amen in church. I tell you, it's already over but for the shouting. . . ." They vanished in the crowd.

"It isn't over yet," said Karel. He was restless, as if the nervous expectancy of everyone around had infected him. "In Rodnik things went so fast, so smoothly, that it's hard to realize what happened —"

"Very little happened!" Kitty disparaged. "You marched in with a lot of men and took Vesely's Cut Glass, and I don't know that what you did was good. . . ."

He looked at her, at the rich, auburn curls which, self-willed and unruly, wriggled out from under her tilted fur cap, at her well-molded shoulders whose lines even her heavy winter coat could not hide, at her hands, capable and warm.

"It was necessary!" he said sharply. "And it was more than just taking Vesely's Cut Glass. It was a revolution."

"Suppose Thomas saw us now?" she asked.

He was not sure whether she had accepted his dictum, or whether her mind had merely reverted to her own troubles. He pressed her arm, again, as if through the pressure he could reassure her on both counts, and said, "Thomas will have to see us sometime."

A truck, its rear filled with policemen, went by. Someone shouted from the sidewalk, "Long live the people's police!" The policemen laughed and waved back.

"So many people," she said. "Almost frightening. Is this what a real revolution looks like?"

"Part of it!" He was still chafing under her doubt. Then he began to feel that she was letting herself be guided. "It's like an iceberg," he told her, more gently. "Most of what's there you can't see; but it's there, and it moves. You must try to understand — my reasons, the reasons of all these people. And it's nothing to be frightened of."

"I'm not afraid when I'm with you, Karel. But when I'm alone . . ." She became oblivious of the streets. "I want to be happy, and I'm afraid I have no right to want it so much."

The trams, black with the crowds coming from Strasnice and Zizkov, rolled down the hill and screeched to a stop. They were apparently being redirected over another route; most of their passengers piled out and continued on foot.

"You're entitled to happiness," Karel said.

"And Thomas?"

"Thomas, too."

Out of a side street a column of workers marched behind flags. They were singing a full-throated melody, not so much defiant as jauntily victorious. For half a minute or so, Kitty fell in step with them; her interest awakened; she tried to read the inscriptions on the banners. Then the buxom women with their berets and the men with their shielded caps pulled ahead.

"From the Kolben-Danek Works," said Karel, "probably a militia detachment. They don't even bother to carry rifles."

"Will there be shooting?" she asked.

"I doubt it."

She seemed not to be too concerned about any personal danger and went on, "If Thomas, too, has a right to be happy, where does that leave us?"

"We must help him."

"It won't be too late for him?"

"I don't think so, Kitty. I hope it won't."

"But there is no assurance?"

"No, there isn't."

She took her arm out of his. People were pushing forward and past them; they became separated.

"Karel!" she called out.

He closed up against her and took hold of her.

"I'm afraid," she said more to herself than to him, "there'll be a day when I reproach myself. . . ."

From below came the clanging and grating of engines. Smoke rolled

up from a gulch, blurring Karel's view. They were crossing the viaduct on Stalin Avenue, under which the trains passed into Wilson Station. The snow had turned into slush, and he felt the dribbling away of his faith that he could handle the situation with Thomas.

There were the living and the dead, he thought; you cannot reproach yourself for what was done to the dead; that was over and past. And there were the living who already counted for dead: they were no longer part of life as it was going to be lived. Like his brother Joseph. Like his brother Thomas, too.

He was glad there were so many people around him. It blunted the fear that was creeping over into him from Kitty. Yes, he was as frightened as she was. He was frightened of his mind that was running away with his conscience; he was killing his own brothers because they had ceased to fit in with his kind of life.

He managed to smile at Kitty, and they drew together.

The stream of people thickened until, at the corner of the National Museum, it sucked Karel and Kitty into its estuary, the closely jammed reaches of Wenceslas Square. The only island in the rippling tide was the towering statue of the Good King who raised his spear high above the head of his horse and stared into the square's downgrade expanse.

From the lantern posts, amplifiers carried the voices of the speakers. The echoes, roaring from the people, trembled uphill along the square and were taken up again and again, like a wave renewing itself by striking the shore before ebbing quietly.

"Long live Benes!"

"Long live Gottwald!"

Karel's restlessness, his apprehension over the final outcome, his private concerns, were gone now that he felt himself joined with the mass. There were so many, thousands upon thousands, that he thought the solid structures bounding the square would have to move aside if the mass took it into its mind to stretch its elbows and square its shoulders. The people were rallying, as they had under Zizka and on Mount Tabor against the Armies of Emperor and Pope, as they had a hundred years ago, on the barricades against the Austrians, and again against the SS troops in May 1945. But this time there was no opposition, and if there had been, its machine guns could have done no more than tatter the edges of the packed mass like fraying the cuffs of an old shirt. The mass generated a spirit by which Karel felt himself borne; and Kitty, he saw, was sensing it, too. Her eyes shone, and the harried expression that had become a fixture of her face, had given way to repose.

It was a spirit of strength that showed itself, not in artificially built lines

and ranks, not in studied battle cries, but in the spontaneity, the in-between silences, the listening, the patient waiting. The people on the square had been waiting for hours, and there was not yet any visible sign of resentment. Tension there was; it hung in the clouded air like a too heavy curtain too tightly drawn.

"Workers of Prague!" a speaker was saying. "Your discipline and your organization is making possible a peaceable solution of the crisis."

They were listening. They were patient. They were waiting. They felt the power they were, because each one of the people was a part of it, and because, without their consent, nothing was possible. And Karel was very conscious that he was also a part of it. He'd had a taste of this experience back home in Rodnik; but here it was so much broader, so much more sweeping that he forgot he was a Benda with all that implied for him: the guilt toward people, the constant need to atone.

"The little men who tried to usurp power over the country have been checkmated."

The people knew that. Standing there on this day, they knew that no one can fight the ocean, the sand, the skies.

"Up to now, however," said the speaker, "the resignations have not been officially accepted."

A stir went through the length and breadth of the square, as if all these thousands were shifting their weight from one foot to the other; there was a low humming, not quite a growl; then quiet again.

"But we will have a new government. That much is sure."

"We want a new government!" The cry rose up, was thrown back from the houses, and returned. "A new government — today!"

Karel was held in the grip of the outburst. He had come a long way for this — from the corpses dissected in Buchenwald, through the loneliness, and the work without pause, to this moment when the people demanded their own government.

"Now you understand what this is, Kitty," he said.

She nodded, but did not speak. He knew then that she, too, was being lifted into this different life and that, to her, he was its protagonist.

"It has something to do with freedom," he said. "Not Joseph's variation. Not even Thomas's."

She dug her fingers into his hand.

The speaker went on, "If the will of the people should be defied, we'll have a general strike."

"*Strike!*" The answer swelled from the far ends until it overflowed the square and surged into the side streets and resounded from there.

They could stop every wheel in the city. With others throughout the

country, they could stop everything, from border to border. They did not need guns. They were as one man and they were quite clear about who they were and what they could do.

And then the curtain was rent. It came with the wail of a Klaxon and something that looked from the distance like a black beetle pushing its way through loose, fine-grained earth. It was a big limousine, preceded by a few policemen trying to persuade the people to give ground and open up a road. It gathered cheers as it approached. It struggled into the square from the direction of Wilson Station and finally stopped. A man got out. He walked to the platform near the stairs leading to the museum entrance.

A hush had settled. The man, squat and unhurried, took his place in the center of the speakers' stand, behind the microphones.

His voice came over the amplifiers, even and cool and sober. "I have an important message. I have come here directly from the President to tell you that he has accepted the resignations which the twelve Ministers handed in last Friday. The President has also agreed to my proposals for the reconstruction of the Government."

He read the names of the men composing the new Cabinet. That done, he continued, "It was not easy for the President to make this decision. But he has accepted the will of the people, even though it is not in complete agreement with his own wishes."

There were again cries of "Long live Benes!" "Long live Gottwald!"

The man waited until quiet had set in once more. He went on, "The forces of reaction which planned this assault on our new Czech democracy have been routed. It was a victory, due to the vigilance, the unity, the strength, the determination of our people. And now that the matter has been settled, let us return to our work, to the rebuilding of our country, to the fulfillment of our Two-Year Plan. Let us make this country of ours a country of the working people, a happy country."

He had finished. No oratory, no grandiose gestures, no flag-waving. Karel was let down. But as the cheers mounted thunderously, carrying the relief, the release from the pent-up agitation, he became slowly aware of how these days had weighed on him. His heart filled with what the people had done. The Israelites must have felt as they did when the waves of the Red Sea closed after the crossing. Karel saw that the man's simple call to work answered a great need and was eminently fitting.

He straightened and said to Kitty, "We can go now."

Thomas came out of the registrar's office at the Philosophical Faculty Building. He had finally discovered Vlasta's name in the old matriculation lists; but again, the only address given was that of the Declerques Institute.

After the rustling, oppressive stillness among the files and papers, his frazzled nerves were hit by the excited voices in the hallways and the quick, noisy steps on the stair wells. By now I should be accustomed to commotion and shouting, he frowned. He had become an expert on crowd psychology. There was hardly a gathering he hadn't joined, a mob he hadn't studied, a demonstration he hadn't watched. All for nothing. He had placed ads in every paper, and they had been appearing since Monday; but these were the days when people read the headlines, not the classified pages. He had gone back to every coffeehouse he and Vlasta had ever sat in, every restaurant they had ever dined at during those few days they had shared in Prague. He had retraced their steps on the walks through the parks. He had been running, perhaps in circles; but as long as his feet kept moving, he had been able to quiet his brain.

Maybe I'm beaten, he thought, but how can I tell? The general in the field knows when he has lost, the businessman closing out his shop, the worker whose hands fail to obey him. I do not know.

He left the building and leaned against one of its pillars. He lit a cigarette and listened idly to the arguments between two groups of students. Some demonstration was shaping up; one group was vociferously against it; the other, equally clamorous, insisted on its purpose. Between them teetered the curious, the undecided, and those who tried to keep the two groups from coming to blows.

This kind of thing had grown to have a certain fascination for him which, at moments, almost overshadowed his rational aim of finding Vlasta. Denounced as a traitor by both Villner and Elinor, he no longer wish-dreamed that he could be the arbiter, nor even a spokesman, in the clash and surge of the crisis; he merely tagged along, getting a vicarious thrill out of a mass on the move, as if history were supplying him with generous if somewhat rough illustrations to his book which never would be printed.

A Czech flag, its red, white and blue pattern lively in the mild wind from the river, materialized from somewhere. A gangling boy with long, yellow hair grasped it and shouted, "Remember November Seventeenth!"

"November Seventeenth — in my eye!" said a dark-complexioned, tilt-nosed girl who, a pile of books clamped under her arm, had come to stand next to Thomas. Realizing that he had heard her, she turned to him and said sarcastically, "Sometimes I wonder if they really believe their own hokum. . . ."

"November Seventeenth?" Thomas hesitantly questioned.

"1939!" The girl raised her brows significantly.

"Oh, yes," he said. He now remembered the date — another demonstration of Prague students, and the Nazis firing into it, killing many, dispers-

ing them, closing the universities. "I wasn't in the country at the time," he said defensively.

Perhaps Vlasta had been in that first demonstration. No, she was too young for that. But there was something wonderful in youth marching for its ideals.

"This isn't the same thing," said the girl. "Who d'you think pays their tuition? The workers! And this half-baked gang has the nerve to shout against them."

"And what are they demonstrating *for*?" asked Thomas.

"Their old men's hock shops, I suppose," the girl replied.

"Freedom!" shouted the gangling youth with the yellow hair. "For Benes! For democracy!"

They moved off, straggling at first, forming themselves into ranks of four and picking up more students as they turned right over the Manes Bridge.

"I think I'll go along," said Thomas, and noticing the dark girl's ironic glance as he pushed himself away from the pillar, he mumbled, "I've got to find somebody!"

He was half convinced that this time he would have better luck. Vlasta was a student, and she was a rebel; and this was a rebellious thing. Perhaps there would be shooting, as in November 1939 — he had run away from the shooting once before and gone to America, and it had spoiled his whole life.

He caught up with the group at the other end of the bridge, as it moved into Prague's Small Side, the left bank of the Moldau River. They were still not very numerous, but they said that other groups, coming from the Technical School, the Faculty of Law, and the Medical School, were going to meet them. Then they would march on Hradcany Hill, to the Presidential Palace, and offer the President their support and tell him to remain strong and to hold out.

Thomas, walking alongside them, joined the rhythm of their marching. Sometimes, they would begin to sing, but after a while, their song would die down. Then the yellow-haired boy would start chanting his slogan: "Freedom! Benes! Democracy!" The street was empty; it seemed that most of the people were elsewhere; finally, even the yellow-haired boy gave up. But they marched on doggedly. Where the street tapered off into a small, tunnel-like passageway, Thomas had to remain behind so as to let the column go through. He felt a little lost. Somehow, the buoyant excitement that had sparked him when he'd been swallowed up by the gray multitude in Old Town Square failed to grip him now. Was it then not the spirit but the size of the mass? Or were there various kinds of mass spirit?

Through the passageway he emerged on a fairly large plaza. He saw his little band in front of St. Nicholas's Church. They looked puny against its mighty walls and high windows, its tall, rich gate, its rounded dome. They were waiting. Then came the far-off sound of voices, some high-pitched and shrill, some clear and young. A couple of policemen stood at the corner of Neruda Street, rifles slung over their shoulders.

Thomas went forward. Out of the direction of Charles Bridge he saw the first ranks of a long string of marchers emerge. His own group started to move, met the others, mingled with them; there was hallooing, boisterous laughing and shouting. When the noise abated, runners went down the column, passing the word to thin out for the steep ascent to Hradcany through the narrow Neruda Street. Somebody had attached a streamer of mourner's crepe to the flag, and the yellow-haired boy was leading a chorus: "Freedom! Benes! Democracy!" One of the policemen was rubbing the back of his head, shoving his cap forward till it sat lopsided on his pate; the other was staring darkly ahead.

The tip of the column was pushing up Neruda Street, past the old courtiers' houses that had already looked down at the plumed soldiers of the mad Emperor Rudolf and of Wallenstein, Duke of Friedland.

Thomas stood, watching the faces, watching for one face. His eyes ached from lack of sleep and from the intensity of effort. He tried to scan the procession to its hindmost row; there were perhaps twelve to fifteen hundred young men and girls. He tried to make out shapes and features, and as the tail end of the column came close, he still had not discovered her. But he would not believe it, not until he had made doubly sure. He pressed past the marchers on their way up Neruda Street; sticking close to the walls of the houses, he began to overtake one rank after the other. The steep grade of the hill and his own concentration made him pant; he heard the quick pumping of his heart over the shuffle of feet. The voluble head of the demonstration was still out of earshot; the students who were around him had pinched faces and kept their anxious questions to a whisper.

He went on as if driven. Some of the students glared at him; some called him to get in line; others thought he was carrying some message and moved aside for him. He told himself his mad dash was nonsense, and throttled that voice with: *And if I overlooked her?* But deep underneath, still another force, unclear, unpronounced, whipped him on. It came from the faces of the marchers, from the bravado with which they were trying to cover their apprehensions; it made him want to flee back, downhill, to the Church of St. Nicholas, to the river, anywhere; and he refused to flee: escape was tantamount to giving up Vlasta, giving up everything, accepting defeat.

Then he saw the flag, and the dense crowd around it.

The head of the column had stopped marching. It had reached the dead end of Neruda Street. A thin lane went farther ahead, skirting the hill. Directly facing the students was a flight of stairs leading straight up to the plateau of Hradcany Square where, framed between the Archbishop's residence and the mosaic-walled Schwarzenberg Palais, the wide vista of the Presidential Palace spread itself.

The top of the stairs was blocked by police.

But at a sharp angle from the foot of the stairs, another path spoked off to the right, leading steeply along the base of the Schwarzenberg Palais, and opening up on Hradcany Square where it was closest to the Presidential Palace. The vanguard of the students spilled into this walled-in footpath, only to meet, at its end, a second cordon. The police were holding their rifles at port; an elderly officer, pistol in the holster strapped to his belt, his lined face worried, was trying to argue. He had difficulty making himself heard; every few seconds he was outscramed either by the students around him, who raised their demands, or by the crowd at the foot of the stairs which continued to grow as more and more of the demonstrators arrived at the dead end and jammed into it.

"Now go back home, boys!" he said.

The cavernous walls of Neruda Street reverberated with the students' shouts: "Freedom! Benes! Democracy!"

"Go back to your schools. . . ."

The yellow-haired, gangling boy was pushed against the officer. He held on to his flag and challenged shrilly, "We want to see the President!"

"The President!" The call was taken up. Thomas raised his voice with theirs. Why shouldn't they see the President? The dark girl had said they were marching for their fathers' hock shops; but the President was the President of the hock-shop owners, too.

Thomas was being shoved along the walled-in path. He now could see the police at close range, their stolid expressions, their bodies filling out their greatcoats. He was trying to keep his footing, and everything went so fast that he had no time to be afraid.

He heard the police officer say, "Now, you don't have a permit to demonstrate —"

Somebody cried, "We didn't get a permit from the Nazis, either!"

The crowd at the foot of the stairs, still growing, was getting into an angry mood. They had organized a chorus, "Long live the Security Police!" and they yelled it again and again, derisively.

Thomas was being jostled. Students thrust at him from behind and pressed past him. "Freedom! Benes! Democracy!" He did not want to be

propelled against the officer; he threw his weight against the mass pushing him forward.

"A delegation!" the officer was saying. "If you'll get together on that, we'll let a delegation through. . . ."

Some of the older students had joined Thomas in an attempt to press back the mass surging up the tight path. "A delegation!" they called. "There'll be a delegation!"

But it was too late. Too many of the students had filtered past the officer and his men, had gained the top of the path, and were fanning out on the plateau. Other students, unwilling to wait at the end of Neruda Street, had broken through on the stairs, or had run ahead on the lane skirting the hill and, through houses and back stairs, had gained Loreto Street and doubled back. All of them arrived on Hradcany Square at the moment when Thomas, forced through the bottleneck of the path, was tumbled onto the open space of the square. The police, rifles still at port, finding themselves outmaneuvered, were falling back on their second line, flush to the fence of the Presidential Palace. Thomas saw the officer, walking backwards, gesticulating, still arguing with the men he considered leaders of the demonstration. By that time, the yellow-haired boy, swinging the flag, was far ahead. Groups of students galloped close behind him. The flag-bearer and the demonstrators appeared smaller, insignificant, spread out, as they were, against the line of police. The students not yet come up from Neruda Street were still shouting for freedom and twitting the police, who could no longer hear them; but on the plateau there were no shouts, only the police, retreating slowly, and the melee of students searching for an opening, some of them hardly more than an arm's length from the nearest rifle.

And then the shot fell.

Somebody screamed. The flag disappeared. But a second later, Thomas saw it again. The yellow-haired boy was holding it; his other arm was supporting a figure that awkwardly dragged its feet. The police, rifles still at port, had stopped retreating a few yards before the fence. For a moment, the flag, the yellow-haired boy, and the wounded one stood out, still and alone. Behind them, the square was alive with students running back toward the footpath and the stairs, helter-skelter, falling over each other — then the flag retreated, too, and was swallowed up.

An ambulance drove up and picked up the wounded boy, who had sunk to the pavement. At the other end of the square, at the gate of the Palace, the officer was conducting a delegation of five students into the courtyard. The line of police was no longer solid. A number of greatcoats were walking over the square, seeking out dazed students and talking to them.

A policeman came up to Thomas. "Why don't you go back to school?" he said. "It's over."

"Yes, I guess it's over," said Thomas. He trudged off, down the stairs to Neruda Street, and down Neruda Street, following the students who were trooping along sullenly. He could have cried, not over the thwarted bravery — there had been little of that; not over what these boys and girls had marched for and what was now irretrievably lost — he didn't know exactly what that was, and didn't care much; but because the whole demonstration was so similar to everything else in his life: a spurt of enthusiasm, and then the meeting with reality.

The yellow-haired, gangling youngster was walking ahead of him, arms linked with some others. They were talking loudly, bragging of what they could have done if the police hadn't opened fire on them, comparing themselves to the heroes of November, telling each other that tomorrow they would demonstrate again, in greater numbers, and how they would sweep the universities clean of Communists.

They were stopped at St. Nicholas's Church. Numbers of routed students already were lining the curb. Up the street came a formation of workers, about sixty of them, men and women, carbines slung over their shoulders.

The workers saw the students and halted. Their faces were hard, their fists closed around the slings of their carbines.

The yellow-haired boy drew in breath to shout a slogan, but his neighbor gripped his arm and hissed something at him. For a minute or two, the opposing forces measured one another in dead quiet.

Then the man in command of the workers ordered, "Forward — March!" The short train of workers turned into a side street and vanished. None of the students moved until the last echo of the workers' footsteps had faded out.

"Jesus!" said the student next to the yellow-haired boy. "I wasn't scared of the Nazis in November '39. I wasn't much scared up on the hill, either. But *now* I was scared."

"Bastards, all of them," said the yellow-haired boy.

Thomas felt a dry sob work its way up through his throat. He didn't want to know whether it was from relief, or from sorrow.

It was dark when Kitty and Karel returned to the Hotel Aurora. Thomas had not yet come back.

"But there's someone else waiting for him, too," said the clerk. "The young lady over there!"

"Vlasta. . . ." said Karel.

Vlasta was sitting in a deep chair, her coat carelessly thrown over the

armrest, her eyes close to the pages of a book so as to overcome the bad light in the lobby. She turned a page and stared at it; her hand went over her eyes as if she wanted to blot out a picture; then she went on reading.

"Shall we talk to her?" said Karel.

Kitty was panicked. Yet she wanted to find out, once and for all, what it was about this woman that could move Thomas so radically. She was filled with resentment even as she told herself that Vlasta was no more than the catalyst in her life with Thomas. And then again, she was beset with horror and with curiosity. Whatever Karel had said in explanation of Vlasta, there was a possibility that Lida and Elinor were right. But on the chance that they were wrong, she felt pangs of conscience, even sympathy. There was also the condescension a woman has toward the successor who has accepted her hand-me-down; she knows the shape of the shoe into which the other is stepping, she knows where the bunions will grow. Perhaps she had no right to indulge in this; it was not certain, or even likely, that Vlasta was the successor in question. Nothing was certain — and the uncertainty, combined with her concern for Thomas, outweighed everything.

"Yes," she answered, "I want to talk to her."

"It may hurt you," Karel warned. "Perhaps I had better do it alone —"

"I've been hurt before," Kitty cut him short. "I've got to know."

She strode ahead. She reached Vlasta's side and glanced at the book.

"A good novel, isn't it, Miss Rehan? . . . My husband can write."

Vlasta started, brushing her coat to the floor. She was off her defenses. She glanced from Kitty to Karel, surprise and chagrin and fear on her face.

Karel picked up the coat. Holding it out, he said pleasantly, "Thomas's novel was quite the rage when it came out. The critics compared it to Maupassant and Kafka and Capek, but the critics are never happy unless they can dream up comparisons. You've never read it before?"

"I just got it from the library," Vlasta answered. She was regaining her poise. Karel's presence seemed to exclude a repetition by Kitty of the scene Lida had made. Accepting her coat from him, she said, "Thank you, Dr. Benda."

"You mean Thomas never gave you a copy?" Kitty asked.

"No," said Vlasta, "he didn't. I never mentioned that I wanted one."

Kitty sat down on a chair Karel had pushed up. "The book was dedicated to me," she said dully.

"I'm sorry." Vlasta kept looking at the book's much-fingered cover. "I'm sorry about all of it. I wish I had never gone to Rodnik; or, once there, had left by the next train. . . ."

"You're waiting for Thomas, the clerk told us," said Karel, feeling that the confessional could come later.

"Have you seen him since he came to Prague?" Kitty broke in. "How is he? Where is he now, do you know? We want to — to take him back with us —"

She stopped. She was no match for Vlasta. Vlasta was clever and independent; Vlasta was bad for her.

"I'm glad you came," said Vlasta. There were shadows underneath her eyes, and her face was drawn. She pulled a strip of newspaper from between the pages of the book. "This is why I'm here."

Vlasta R., Kitty read: Urgent you communicate with Thomas B. at Hotel Aurora. She handed the clipping to Karel.

"I didn't know whether to come here or not," Vlasta said, latching her fingers nervously. "But he's always been good to me. And then, as I sat here reading his book, I began to feel that he'd be better off alone. . . . Dr. Benda — he didn't believe what Petra's mother said about me?"

"Of course not!" He leaned forward, his eyes tense and troubled and sympathetic. "But I've got to ask you something else, Vlasta. Do you love him? This is very important to Mrs. Benda and to me. I want you to be absolutely honest with us and with yourself."

Vlasta's fingers crept up to her silver medallion. She gazed at Karel, and she thought that he should be able to understand.

"Sometimes I feel as if something in me had been scorched out, like land after a bombing," she said. "I once loved a man. They killed him. They made me watch how they killed him. I could save him, they said, if I told them what they wanted to know. I knew it was a lie; they would have killed him anyhow, after I talked. At least that's what I keep repeating to myself. . . ."

For a while, no one spoke. Then Kitty said, "I wish I could sink into the ground. I feel so ashamed — for myself — for my family —" She wanted to ask if Vlasta needed anything and what the Bendas could do for her, but she sensed it would sound as if she were trying to pay a debt which could not be weighed in any currency.

Vlasta seemed to have read her thoughts. "I have a job," she said. "Machine operator. I'm learning. It makes me feel useful to feed some material into a machine and to see a practical thing come out that people need. Also I've been marching with my new colleagues. That's good, too. My back and my feet may ache; I prefer that to pains in my head or my heart."

She had been speaking with calm self-sufficiency, hardly raising her voice. Now her tone gained warmth and became wistful, "How has Petra been taking it? You have seen her, Dr. Benda?"

"The last days," he admitted uncomfortably, "were quite crowded, even in Rodnik."

Her eyes grew darker, and she said quickly, "Of course. Only I like Petra. She's got the makings of something very fine in her, and I wouldn't want that to get lost in the shuffle."

"We will look after her," said Karel, "as soon as we're back in Rodnik. We'll look after Thomas, too."

"Then you think I can go?"

"Yes, Vlasta," he said gently. "It would be better if Thomas didn't find you here."

He helped her into her coat. She shoved the book into the coat pocket and, turning once more to Kitty, said, "I don't know what you feel about your husband, and I have no right to advise you, and wouldn't be sure what to tell you if I had. But please believe me — if I felt anything for him, it was the feeling one ill person has for another —"

She pulled her beret over her tight, black hair and walked out.

"What a family we are!" said Karel. "Whatever we touch turns sour."

He eased himself into the chair Vlasta had vacated. The whole day fell upon him — the trip and the search after Thomas and the giant demonstration on Wenceslas Square, the fact that the Revolution was over and that he would have to pick up the shards of his and Kitty's and his brothers' lives and make new adjustments and see what could be pasted together — and the end of the day was not yet.

"Aren't you hungry, Kitty?" he asked from under his hand which half-covered his face.

"No."

"You should eat something though."

"I couldn't, Karel."

"Well," he sighed, "neither could I, come to think of it." He looked at the overly ornamented clock above the clerk's counter. "The last train home is just pulling out. Do you — do you want to sleep in Thomas's room?"

"Should I?" She tried to find in his face a hint as to what he wanted her to say or do, but she saw only how tired he was. "Somebody ought to stay with him — perhaps. . . ."

He did not answer. He got up and went to the clerk's desk and asked for two rooms; but the clerk stated that with most of the Works Council Convention delegates still in town, he had only one room available — however, there was a couch in Mr. Thomas Benda's room, and since it was all in the family. . . . He blinked meaningfully toward Kitty.

"I'll take that room," said Karel. He showed the clerk his identification

pass and Kitty's, and registered. The clerk gave him a key chained to a fist-sized wooden ball with the room number scratched on it.

"This is the only thing they had," Karel explained as he handed the contraption to Kitty. "Why don't you freshen up and stretch out?"

"Not yet." She tried to smile. "I can't bear being alone just now. Karel —"

"Yes?"

"What are we going to tell Thomas?"

"Everything."

"About Vlasta? About us?"

He took her hand and, holding it firmly, said, "Now listen, Kitty. When a child is to be born, we can alleviate the mother's pain, but not the child's. The little thing probably suffers horribly, but it forgets. This case is similar. . . ." He shrugged. "We've got to get him out of the womb in which he's been hiding — his mother's, yours, Elinor's, Vlasta's, God knows whose."

"But does it have to be today? We have time, Karel, you and I — a whole life's worth of time. We must consider the shape he'll be in. Vlasta said he was ill. I don't know about medicine as you do, but I know if you open a boil before it's ripe, it comes back. Can't we wait till we have him in Rodnik, till he feels better, till he's able to build up some resiliency? . . ."

"This particular boil should have been opened long ago," he said acidly. He saw her anguish, and conceded half a point. "But he must be told about Vlasta."

"Must he? And why now?"

"Because —" he stopped.

"He's only been living by hopes," she said. "If you take away all his doubts, you take away all his hopes."

And if you take away his wife . . . he continued her thought. That he was taking something Thomas himself had thrown in the ash can, unfortunately mattered little to her. To her, falling in love with another man was sin, regardless of how real the love was, how justified her feelings, how big the provocation. And if the other man was her husband's brother, and if she'd never loved her husband, the sin became monstrous. She wasn't concerned about the furies that might pursue Thomas; she had her own to worry about.

And he, himself — toward whom did his duties and loyalties lie? Toward her, who had to live with her conscience? Toward Thomas, who would either face up to life or recede into the twilight of complete emotional childhood? Or toward himself, who was an interested party and whose right to pass verdict was doubtful?

"Have it your way, Kitty," he said heavily. "But you should be

clear about this: You're sparing him not for his sake, but for your own."

"I know," she said. "I'm glad you know it, too."

Thomas came into the lobby.

Kitty jumped up.

He saw his wife and his brother. "Karel!" he said, "Kitty . . . ! How nice of you!"

Then his expression changed. His inflamed eyes winked shrewdly, "The rescue squad, I presume? Well, there isn't much to be rescued. I've been hunting for freedom. It's blossoming out all over — so many different sorts I don't know which to pick. Up on Hradcany Hill, I saw the most disappointing sight of my life: A bunch of students, shouting *Freedom*, and running away from the first and only shot."

"You weren't on Wenceslas Square?" said Karel.

"No."

"You might have felt more optimistically."

"I might," said Thomas, throwing himself into a chair. "I don't know. I've had a very exciting visit to Prague. I've learned that I don't belong anywhere, although at moments I had the greatest feeling of belonging I've ever had. That's kind of sad, isn't it? A time has come to which you have to say either Yea Yea or Nay Nay, but I find one-syllable words uninteresting. I'm thirty-four years of age, and have outlived my time. You haven't heard anything from Vlasta, have you?"

Neither Karel nor Kitty spoke.

"How could you have!" Thomas went on. "They drove her out of Rodnik. They said terrible things about her. I tracked it down. Elinor started it, and Lida carried it through. There's a conspiracy on, I tell you, to drain the sap of life out of me —"

He regarded Kitty long and thoughtfully, and his voice rose out of its listlessness. "Poor Kitty — so much patience, so much loyalty. Why don't you give up? Don't you ever get sick and tired of me? My book won't be printed, either; I have it from Villner himself. So the reflected glory of being Mrs. Thomas Benda is quite *passé*."

She bit her lips.

"Sorry," he said, "sorry."

"Thomas, let's go home," she pleaded.

"Home?" he asked. "Where is my home? With you? In Rodnik?"

"Obviously it is," said Karel, "until you make other arrangements."

"And Vlasta?" said Thomas.

Karel glanced at Kitty. She did not speak up. Karel said, "You'll have to wait until she comes to you, Thomas. If she loves you, she will. If not —"

"If she loves me?" Thomas smiled knowingly. "She doesn't. That's the hell of it. She never did. I built myself another dream. After what happened with Lida, wouldn't she have come to me first thing, instead of running away? All right, Karel, you're a doctor, you'll say it was shock. Is she the kind of person who shocks that easily? But even assuming there was a momentary loss of her facility for reasoning — it couldn't have lasted, and she knew where to find me. It's not she who is lost — it's I. Lost and buried."

He wrapped his coat tighter about him, as if he felt exposed. Kitty's moist eyes sought Karel's. Karel reached into the pocket of his vest and pulled out a small envelope. Ripping it open, and dropping two tiny pills into Thomas's hand, he said, "This will put you to sleep. Kitty will take you to your room."

Thomas obeyed wordlessly and followed Kitty to the elevator.

Karel saw the door close after them, saw the dim light of the car float upwards, and the cable unwind. Then he sat down, elbows on his knees, his face in his hands.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

JOSEPH was having a nightmare. He choked and gasped and struggled to wake up.

Lida stood over him. In the glare of the ceiling light, he saw her gray-streaked hair hanging stringy over her shoulders.

He was not sure whether it was still part of his horrible dream; then he heard the bell.

"They're at the door!" Lida shook him. "Get up!"

The bell sounded again, long, urgently. The insistent ring was real; Lida, ugly, frightened, was real. The choking sensation of his dream took hold of him once more. He swallowed hard, and shivered.

"Put on your robe," he said, his feet mechanically fishing for his slippers, "and give me mine."

His legs buckled as he stood up; he held on to the footboard of his bed. He thought of the braces worn by people who had suffered infantile paralysis. He pushed himself to the door. If it was the police, it was better not to be afraid, or at least not to show it. And they had nothing on him, nothing at all, absolutely nothing.

He walked down the stairs to the ground floor, slowly, step by step, tying the belt of his robe as he went. He was still short of breath, and his

heart beat in his throat. He cursed his weakness. Then his anger turned on the men who were at the bell again. It was scandalous — in the middle of the night, just like the Nazis! Who did they think they were? He would tell them off; he had to; in cases like this you must take the initiative and keep it. He was still a deputy. They had robbed him of everything, but there was one thing he wouldn't allow them to take, ever: His dignity, as a man, as a citizen.

He tore open the door and shouted into the dark, "What in the devil's name —"

There was only one man, who said, "Good evening, Benda. What kind of soft pillows do you sleep on, eh? Letting me stand out here and ring. . . ."

"Minister Dolezhal! I thought it was —"

Dolezhal stepped through the door, took off his black Homburg and his coat and hung them neatly on the wardrobe stand. He turned, rubbing his hands. "Close the door, man!" Then he discovered Lida coming down the stairs. "I'm deeply sorry to disturb you at this hour, madame. But the matter couldn't wait, I assure you." He walked up to her, kissed her hand, and rambled on genially, "I won't keep you up long. I've got to talk to your husband."

"I'm so relieved it is you," said Lida. She became acutely conscious of her appearance and wanted to retreat. "A drink?" she asked. "Coffee?"

"Anything, madame — just anything!"

Dolezhal was his old self, master of the situation. His mustache bristled over his lip, and his large-featured, regular face was benign and controlled. Once the decision had been made in Prague, even though it was against him, he had regained his elasticity and spirit.

"Joseph, my friend!" he said. "Where can we sit and have our little conference?"

Joseph led him to the living room and switched on some lamps. Lida, her hair combed, her face powdered, her lips showing a touch of color, returned with a bottle and glasses and a tray full of cookies. Joseph motioned her to leave; but Dolezhal caught the gesture and stabbed his little white hand in her direction, "Please stay, madame. This concerns you just as much as it does your husband."

She smiled with what had remained in her of feminine charm.

Dolezhal, however, was already addressing Joseph. "You weren't in Prague, these days, I noticed."

Joseph frowned. "I didn't feel well. I even saw the doctor — we have one right in the family. . . ." He laughed. "Heart trouble."

"Nothing serious, I hope?"

"Not too —"

"I'm glad to hear it," said Dolezhal, pleasantly. "For what you'll have to do, a bad heart wouldn't be too helpful."

Obviously he doesn't believe me, thought Joseph. It didn't matter. Dolezhal had resigned, and they had taken his resignation and made him eat it. No more Mr. Minister. *What you'll have to do.* . . . I'll have to do nothing, not a God-damned thing, unless I'm good and ready and willing to do it.

"Actually," Dolezhal went on, "your presence in Prague was not required. As events unfortunately developed, you could not have helped, either."

Joseph nodded. He had a good idea of why Dolezhal was offering the rationalizations which he, Deputy Joseph Benda, a reputedly loyal member of the Party, should have supplied.

"We've been soundly trounced!" Dolezhal clapped his hands as a well-slept, happy man does before starting his morning's work at a clean desk. "We relied on too many uncertain forces, we underestimated the strength of the enemy, and when we struck and resigned, we laid ourselves wide open to a countermaneuver we should have anticipated. Now, what are we going to do?"

It was a rhetorical question, and it was asked, Joseph knew, to make him feel the thrill of co-initiating the new line.

"You're asking me?" he said. "What did *you* lose — an office chair? I lost my Works, Mr. Dolezhal, and my wife's factory — everything!"

"We're poor," said Lida, who suddenly was hit anew by the magnitude of the disaster. "We're poorer than the dirtiest worker in the plant. He has his pay envelope coming, at least. We'll have to give up the house and . . ." Her voice, caught in its own emotion, gave out for a moment. "I've been poor before. Under the Nazis I starved and I brought up my child in one little back room in Prague. I don't mind it — but then I had hope. . . ."

"Hope!" Dolezhal's hand struck out sharply. "That's it! That's why I borrowed a car and drove out here at night! Hope, yes! If you lie down and give up that easily, you might as well call up your local church to arrange for your funeral. I've always known you as a sensible woman, Mrs. Benda — a woman who sees things and acts on them. Tell this man of yours not to go blaming me! We tried, and we tried hard, and with every means at our disposal. So we'll try all over again. You go along with that, don't you?"

"Yes," said Lida, and her eyes grew sharp. "We must. There's no other way. You know, they came, with their Action Committee — they came into my office, into the house my father built, and threw me out."

"They would!" said Dolezhal.

"And Joseph let them."

"Please . . ." Dolezhal smiled. "At this point we can't afford recriminations. Your husband probably chose the wisest course under the circumstances. But that does not mean that we'll stay out forever. We're going to leave and we're going to come back, and next time we're going to stick."

"Leave?" said Joseph.

"Don't tell me you never considered it!"

Joseph gulped down his drink and motioned Lida to refill his glass. Elinor, the American visas. . . . Of course, he'd thought of it.

"What are we going to do?" Dolezhal repeated his rhetorical question. "We gave up our positions, and what we didn't give up, we lost. From where are we going to operate? Pankrac Prison? There'll be no more freedom here for anyone who doesn't submit."

"The people—" Joseph said vaguely—"there must be people. . . ."

"People are stupid and cowardly," Dolezhal stated. "February 1948, in Czechoslovakia, will go down in history as the prize example of that fact."

People were stupid and people were cowardly; Joseph agreed to that. But how were you going to get back into power without them?

"Then leave!" he said. "Who's holding you?"

"Joseph!" Lida cried out. "And what'll become of us? You were not in the country when the Nazis were here. I was. Never again! I tell you, never again!"

"For Christ's sake, drop it!" Joseph raised his hands.

Dolezhal took a small sip and closed his eyes philosophically. "You're so right, Mrs. Benda. A pest air is sweeping in on this country, and it's affecting all of us. Your husband will feel better once he's outside."

"So I'll feel better outside," said Joseph. "And when and how are we going to get back in?"

"I can't give you a timetable." Dolezhal's tone, though still level, showed his annoyance. "It never was just a question of a small country and its insignificant parties and their moves and countermoves. But now it has definitely become a European question, a world question. We'll come back when the whole question is being settled."

"You mean war?"

"Do you think the men who took over from us will vacate their seats as lightly as we did? They'll have to be blasted out of them!"

Lida shook Joseph's shoulder. "I've always told you: Don't make concessions, don't let them have anything. They'll keep it. They'll never give it up—"

"They will, they will!" said Dolezhal. "But I'd like all three of us to be alive and well when that time comes."

"War . . ." Joseph stared at the naked flesh of his feet. He saw the thin veins and the blood coursing in them, and he hid his feet under the chair.

"What do you know of war? You sat in an office in London, and when the bombs came you went down into a shelter so deep that even the biggest couldn't reach it. But I saw the dead that were brought back to my base, and the ones that couldn't be brought back. I saw —"

"You want your Works back, don't you? You want to live, don't you?"

"I saw my planes go out. I was a coward, too, you know? I even had the nerve to pray to my God and thank Him that I could stay on the ground."

"But you can fly a plane?"

Joseph looked up, uncomprehendingly. "Yes, naturally."

Dolezhal's hand cut through the air. "The borders have been closed. On Friday noon, the regular passenger plane from Prague to Bratislava will have as co-pilot the son of a friend of mine who wants to get out, too. Nice boy, the co-pilot, but I understand he's new in the business and not so good at taking off and landing. I don't know how co-operative the captain of the plane will be, and as I said, I'd like all three of us to be alive for the day when we come back."

All three of us, thought Joseph. What touching concern for Lida and me!

"Can you be ready?" said Dolezhal.

Lida laughed softly. "I've been packed for weeks. All we've got left in the world, all that's worth anything."

Dolezhal smiled at her. "Madame, the more I know you, the higher you rise in my estimation. You see how it is — taking this plane will eliminate asking for passports and arousing the attention of my former colleague, the Minister of the Interior. I know him well, he gets suspicious easily. But we're just taking a routine trip to Bratislava and say we'll go on from there to the Tatra Mountains. We've all had a strenuous time, we all can do with a little rest cure. . . ." His face was content and smooth, his mustache twitched, and he added, "You'll like Mrs. Dolezhal, madame. And I'm sure Margot will like you."

Joseph poured another drink and downed it. He got up and walked over to his guest and laid his big hands on Dolezhal's wrists before the ex-Minister could again let loose with one of his eloquent jabs.

"Now you listen, Dolezhal. You may be in a spot that makes you want to get out quickly. I, however, have a wife and a child —"

"But we're coming along!" Lida protested.

"A wife and a child and a home, and I'm not going to risk them, not for you, not for anybody, not in any crazy adventure that has as much chance as all your big plans. You understand that, don't you? Lida, if you'll bring Mr. Dolezhal's hat and coat . . ."

Not a muscle moved on Dolezhal's placid face. He waited until Joseph let go of his wrists. Rubbing them a little, he said, "I understand. I've never had many illusions about you. But you do *not* understand. Perhaps it is my

fault. I drove for three and a half hours and became pretty tired and so omitted to give you some information which might matter to you. I have it on the best authority that General Duchinsky was ordered to report to the Minister of National Defense tomorrow — no, today, it's already Thursday — at four in the afternoon. You know Duchinsky better than I do. Do you give him more than twenty-four hours until he opens up and begins to blab like an old woman?"

"What's this about Duchinsky?" Lida asked hastily. "You never tell me anything, Joseph! Why is your face so white? Mr. Dolezhal, what has he bungled now? . . ."

Joseph sat down. His hands dangled between his knees. "Why did you want to ruin me?" he said helplessly. "What did I ever do to you? Why did you get me into this?"

"I'll be getting you out of it, too, won't I?" said Dolezhal.

Even a few days' emptiness can deprive a house of the quality of being lived in; the closed windows have made the air stale, the chairs stand futile, the pillows on the couch have gathered dust.

Thomas set down his suitcase and Kitty's in the hall and went to his study. Kitty *had* been in it — the papers on his work table had been sorted and piled, the pencils were sharpened, his reference books placed in order. A dead orderliness, a love grown fallow . . . He walked to the mirror and scrutinized his face. A sallow-complexioned man was staring at him, with dreary eyes and pouting lips and a nose grown too large for his chin. A bankrupt man thrown on charity, financial, intellectual, moral.

Those pills of Karel's had been a boon. He had slept almost throughout the whole ride to Rod'nik, his head on Kitty's lap. Not that he had put it there; they apparently considered him ill, and that's how they treated him.

It was nice to be ill, though. People took care of you, and it was legitimate that they should. In a sense, he had always been taken care of, ill or not, and what was happening now was that he sank deeper and deeper into the mattress. If you stayed in bed long enough, you couldn't get up any more. The muscles of your legs grew weak and became useless, bedsores appeared, you were given massages and rubbed down with alcohol and baby oil, you slept away more and more of your time until, in the end, sleep overtook you completely.

Kitty came to the door. She had changed into a house dress and carried a tray with tea and toast.

He said, "Come in, come in. . . ."

"Why don't you lie down?" she asked.

He did.

The couch was soft with age, giving. Kitty fluffed up a couple of pillows

and, raising his head, gently shoved them underneath it. Then she sat down at the edge of the couch, balancing the tray on her knees, and held out cup and saucer to him.

He drank some tea and nibbled at the toast and closed his eyes. He heard the jingle of the dishes as she set the tray on the table. He felt her again taking her place on the couch. She must be leaning over him; he could sense the warmth of her body; her finger tips were stroking softly along his forehead, relaxingly. For a while, she continued in a systematic, efficient way; she probably had perfected this touch long ago, as a nurse. When she thought him asleep, she eased herself away from his side and returned to spread a blanket over him. Then she opened the window.

He threw off the blanket and sat up. He laughed as she turned in surprise. "I just wanted to see how long you'd carry this on, Kitty. Or should I have waited a week or a month to give your sense of duty a chance to exhaust itself?"

"Sense of duty!" she exclaimed. She had known how difficult the job ahead of her would be, and now it was beginning. "Can't we postpone this, Thomas, until you're well?"

"Or perhaps you are one of those people who take pleasure in flagellating themselves. That's really barbarous and medieval. Look at yourself, Kitty — a husky, Czech country wench, still in her best years, still able to foal half a dozen times — not children from me, I wouldn't dare put another Benda into the world, we're rotten and decadent — we've played our hand, we bluffed our way through, but when it came to putting the cards on the table, we couldn't take a trick. So why the pity? You should get out and run while you still can. . . ."

Involuntarily, Kitty stepped back. He wasn't play-acting. He was a man with his insides bared, like a surrealist painting. She wanted to cover up the open wound crawling with self-destruction, as she had covered him with the blanket.

"It is hard to explain," she said; "but don't you feel that we still belong together?"

"Belong together?" he asked, looking straight at her. "From the day I met you, from the day I came fleeing to you, did we ever belong together? I've been using you, Kitty, as I'm using the walls of this house to keep out the cold and the wind and threats and upsets. You know it, and it's spoiled your life. For years, I felt this kind of thing was only just and proper. I was entitled to it, I felt, as I was entitled to my dividend payments from the Benda Works. I was entitled to it — as an artist, as a spokesman, as a man. And now all this has broken down. My art is no good any more, I'm ridiculous as a spokesman, and a failure as a man."

She started to say something, but he waved her off.

"Don't you think I'd like your services? Don't you know I love to be taken care of and nursed? But I'm broke, flat broke, I can't pay you, and in this new society that was ushered in yesterday, you've got to give for what you receive. So kindly let me stand on my own two feet and let me go, wherever I have to go, by myself."

In a way, he was right. But she could not admit it. He was giving her her freedom, and she could not accept it.

"I don't trade love," she said sadly. "That wasn't our life as I understood it. I'm not asking you for anything. . . ."

"Just the little bit of pride I've got left in me. You want to catch me when I fall — and each time you do, I'll have to say Thank You. You want to scratch me when I itch — and each time you do, I'll slide deeper into my debt."

And why not? he suddenly thought. He wasn't asking her to offer herself, she was doing it on her own, entirely on her own. In a few days, she'd be able to reweave for herself the net of her illusions and be quite happy — the kind of happiness she hankered after. And he would be able to go on living as he always had, warm and comfortably wrapped up in her love and care.

"Damn you, Kitty — you do *not* love me! I slept with Elinor. I swear I did. And I would have slept with Vlasta if she had let me! And I would have to pick up the nearest whore just to show myself that I'm me, Thomas Benda, still good for something. How can you love me? Don't pretend. In God's name, don't pretend now — do you love me?"

He glared at her viciously, his arms stretched out, his thin wrists protruding from his cuffs, as if he were holding out to her the wretched bowl filled with the bitter mess of his defeats.

She was silent.

"Ah!" he said, "I knew it! Whom do you love? Karel? He's a Benda, but he's the best of us. Something good may yet come out of him —"

"I do love you."

"You don't say it right. I have a fine ear for nuances. Go to Karel. Tell him I sent you. Tell him you're free."

"You're just worried I'll leave you as everyone else has," she said kindly. "I won't, though. Lie down, now. We've talked much too much, and little sense." She came to the couch to cover him again.

He stood up. He felt shaky, but wonderfully light in his head and his heart.

"All right," he said, "have it your way. You'll stay. I make this your house. All that's in it is yours."

He went to the door.

The finality of everything closed in on her. She had read books and seen movies and plays where people came to such partings. She had often wondered what it really felt like. It felt numbing, like the sheet of lead they laid on you before X-raying.

"Where are you going?" she called.

"My suitcase is still packed," he answered from outside the study. "There are a few more things I want to put in it."

She hurried after him. "You have no place where you can go, Thomas. I'll go."

He put his arm around her and let his lips brush her forehead and eyes. Then he went to the phone and gave the operator Karel's number.

"Karel? — I've just told Kitty to leave my house. Will you stay home until she gets there? . . . Yes? . . . Thank you."

He hung up and heard her behind him, weeping softly.

"Don't sniffle!" he said irritably. "All your life you've been romantic. Grow up!"

Joseph drove to the garage and surrendered his entire supply of ration coupons. He was fortunate. As Deputy he had been getting a generous gasoline ration, and he had been able to save some of it for an emergency. He had the tank filled to the brim.

"You've still got some coming," said the attendant, comparing the figure on the pump with the number of tickets in his hand.

"I thought so," Joseph said. "Glad there are some honest people left in this country." He climbed out of his car and unlocked the baggage compartment. Dragging out two empty spare cans, he asked, "Have you got enough for these, too?"

The attendant wiped his hands on his overalls. "Sure!" He led the nozzle of his hose to the opening of the first can, pressed the release, and over the splashing said, "Where are you going, Mr. Benda?"

"Tatra Mountains! There's a small place I know near Pistany, just a few houses, and a lot of peace. Maybe I'll stay there for a while. My nerves are shot to pieces. I even had to see my brother, the doctor, about it."

The man had filled the cans and put on the lids. "That's too bad. But after what happened. . . ." He screwed the lids tight.

Joseph joked, "I've always wanted a good long vacation and never could afford to take it. Now I can. Now I've got time."

The attendant laughed. "You're lucky then, I guess. They say we're going to get vacations, too, four weeks every year, every workingman. But I'd like to see it first."

"Maybe you'll get them," grinned Joseph. "It's a worker's government now, and maybe it'll end up with everybody having twelve months' vaca-

tion per year. You never can tell!" He helped the man to reload the cans into the rear of his car and carefully locked the compartment.

"Taking the family along?" the attendant asked.

"Naturally! I'm a family man — or didn't you know?" Joseph peeled off a few bills, pressed them into the attendant's hand and closed the fellow's fingers over them.

"Well!" said the attendant, feeling the size of the bills. "Then I hope you have a fine trip and get better soon. Nothing but health counts!"

"Nothing but health!" said Joseph and backed out of the garage. He drove with a straight face, but his lips were compressed grimly. Nosy person. Everybody spying on everybody else. But the talk had been just what he wanted. There were a few more things in this line he had to do: Put through a long-distance call to the Cedok Travel Service in Prague and reserve seats on tomorrow noon's plane to Bratislava and inquire about train connections further on; ask the travel bureau about the best hotels in the Tatras and pick one of them, the one that sounded nicest; wire the hotel for reservations and leave its name as a forwarding address with the Rodnik post office. Perhaps he should even go to the plant and leave the address with Kravat, just in case mail still came to the Benda Works — no, better not; the less Kravat knew, the less he would think; Kravat's thoughts were liable to run in undesirable directions.

Joseph had driven almost back to his house when he stopped the car. For a minute or so he sat behind the wheel, fondling the knob of his gear shift, his hat shoved off his forehead. There was still another matter to be taken care of. It had been in the lower reaches of his mind throughout the sleepless small hours of the morning. He had not talked to Lida about it because his thoughts had been too hazy; but now they were resolving themselves and he knew that he would have to take a stab at the matter — more, that if he didn't succeed, the whole venture into which Dolezhal had forced him would end abysmally even if he should get across the borders without mishap.

He turned the car around, toward the valley and over the bridge spanning the Suska River. To the left rose the smokestack of the Benda Works; but he steered right and took the ascent to St. Nepomuk. The curving road flowed away easily under him; the Usti *Kreisleiter's* old car was still in excellent condition, and it was a shame to have to leave it, forever, at the Prague airport. Well — better a car than your liberty.

He waited a long time at Thomas's door, pressing his gloved finger on the bell. When, despondently, he had half made up his mind to give up, he heard steps, and the door was opened for him.

"You, Thomas?" he said. "Are you alone? Kitty gone out?"

"Get inside! It's cold!" Thomas, shuddering, buttoned his old fleece

jacket. He drew Joseph into the house and took him to the stove in the living room. He had a fire going. In front of the stove lay the burnt matches and strips of paper and wood shavings that showed the trouble he had had in making it work. His hands were dirty, a smudge ran along his cheek, and on a small table stood a bottle and a half-filled glass.

"Settle down for a good long stay!" Thomas invited. "I understand you were relieved of Lida's property, too. So you've got nothing serious to do, and I can use visitors. Kitty's gone. Don't stare at me! She's gone for good. I kept the house because she said I had no place to go to, and I haven't, that's the truth. Drink?"

He rummaged around for a glass, found it, wiped it out with his thumb, and filled it with the yellowish Slivovice.

It took Joseph some time to adjust himself to the new facts. Then he saw that the long overdue break had played into his hands. It would be much simpler, now. There were no more ties to hold Thomas to Rodnik, to the country. He would pick Thomas up, as you pick up a waif, and carry him along. He even could talk openly about it with him; they were back where they had started — the young brother who would give expression to the thoughts and efforts of the older, the team which had produced the *Liberator Appeals*. Even better: With Thomas along, the flight abroad ceased being an escape to avoid prosecution for something which had been no crime when it was done; flight became meaningful, a new beginning, the first step to triumphant return.

"Don't you have anything to say?" asked Thomas.

Joseph pulled himself together. "Yes, quite a lot. Me, with my systematic business mind, I was just trying to put Roman and Arabic numerals before my comments."

Thomas raised his glass. "Start with some sympathy!"

"After the way you carried on with the Rehan girl? And she being slightly on the queer side!"

"Lida has a cesspool for a heart," Thomas announced. "You can quote me."

Joseph said agreeably, "Lida has her weaknesses. But she's not as stupid as you think she is. She told me years ago that the thing between you and Kitty wouldn't last. How did the end come?"

Thomas regarded his brother from the side. Joseph was so much more pleasant since he had to give up the Benda Works; he was almost human again.

"The end? Very quickly, very painlessly. I think I handled it quite well. I told her to go."

"And she went?"

"To Karel's. He's always gathering strays. And she's a nurse by training and by character. The two ought to make a swell pair."

The bluster was quite apparent; but Joseph kept his observations to himself. "And you?" he asked. "What are your plans?"

Thomas shrugged.

"A man usually has this or that in mind before he tells his wife to go to hell."

Thomas flared up, "I told her no such thing! We parted in friendship, and I like and respect her, and I'll thank you to remember that!"

"I was only trying to help you."

Thomas glanced skeptically at his brother. People, Joseph not excluded, had helped him — usually for reasons of their own — until he was nothing but a sucked-out shell.

"Since you have no plans," said Joseph, "and since you are free — as free as I am, and even freer . . . I'm going to the Tatras tomorrow. Would you like to come along? I'll pay the expenses — I don't want you to worry about that — what money I've got left I'm going to spend. A few weeks of this new Government, and my money won't be worth the flatulence in my stomach. . . . We might as well use it while we can."

The Tatras, thought Thomas. Jagged mountains without the softness of the hills herabouts; clear, thin air; no people; his meals served for him, his room made up for him; and above all, a new perspective.

"Lida coming along?"

"Lida and Petra."

"No," said Thomas. "The offer is very kind, I appreciate it. But not with Lida."

Joseph laughed. "You won't have to see her, not even at the dinner table. You can have your food brought up to your room. Besides — confidentially — since the Action Committee took away Vesely's, she has become a very minor partner in the firm of Benda." He chuckled at the witty way in which he had put the thought.

"How long do we stay?" Thomas asked.

"Oh — I don't know. Ten days, two weeks, three — as long as the money holds out. And if you don't like it, you can always go back. So what do you lose?"

Thomas was tempted. It would be a period of grace — no responsibilities before he was ready to accept them; and time to get over the shocks administered to him by others and by himself. He shrugged again; but it meant: What else can I do? And Joseph understood him.

They drank in silence, comfortably stretched, the fire warming their feet. Then Joseph said, "I'll come for you tomorrow morning about eight. And we're going to fly from Prague to Bratislava — I hate long trips.

So limit your baggage. But I suggest you take along any manuscripts you're working on, and whatever else you have that's irreplaceable."

"For the Tattras?" Thomas asked idly. The suspicion that had been germinating in him ever since Joseph made his magnanimous offer, and belittled the objectionable company of Lida, took root and grew.

"You know how it is," said Joseph. "No one will be at your house, and with the new people in power, any respectable person and what he owns has become free game."

"And if you went on from the Tattras — somewhere else?"

Joseph grabbed the poker and jabbed it into the coals so that the sparks flew up and the fire roared. "They've taken away our work — my furnaces and your book — right? Our homes will be next. Our money will go fast. The only thing they can't take is what's between you and me. Thomas, you and I have fought over little issues. They're not essential. And now they've shrunk to zero. If we go on, as you call it, from the Tattras somewhere else, we'll go together."

He put the poker aside and reached for his coat. "Tomorrow morning at eight? There's no time to lose." And as Thomas said nothing, he took his silence for acquiescence, and left.

Thomas moved nearer to the stove. He held off closing its door. The ever-changing forms of the flames held his eyes. A flying witch with a high, pointed hat flickered into a church with two towers, which became a dragon that turned into a nestful of young eagles stretching their beaks toward imaginary food. Elinor had told him to come with her. Why was going with Joseph any different from going with Elinor? Only at that time he still had a wife and a home. The wife he had sent away, his home was falling to dust before his eyes. Perhaps Joseph was better than Elinor, better than Kitty. A man didn't impose on you as women did. And a brother was a brother. Blood was thicker than water, and water killed fire. There was Lida, of course, but Lida was a very minor partner in the firm of Benda; and Petra would need attention now that Vlasta was gone. Poor Vlasta, no place, no home . . . He was some fool, sitting here, mourning over Vlasta's having neither place nor home. Where was *his* place in the world, where was *his* home?

He banged shut the door to the stove.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

PETRA had slept through Dolezhal's night visit.

In the morning, however, she was quick to notice the subtle change night had brought. Although the gloom, which had settled over the household since her father's permanent return from Prague, was not dispelled, it seemed to have condensed and taken on a definite, tangible shape creating an excited motion, like people hurrying to secure doors and windows before a storm.

Petra observed, sullenly, her mother whispering sharply as the door to the packing room was slammed closed; her father dragging papers and files and ledgers behind the house, piling them into a wire basket near the back fence, pouring gasoline out of a can over the collection, and setting fire to it.

No one called on her to help, perhaps because both Lida and Joseph were too preoccupied to think in terms of child psychology, or because they felt that Petra's help was not worth the trouble of breaking through her churlish manner. This sullenness was Petra's defense and retreat; her sulky silences and abrupt snapping, her listless movements and her retirement, were her way of holding her parents under an indictment she did not dare to present openly. Her attitude was at once profitable and painful to her. It enabled her to cover up her own sense of guilt; at the same time it intensified all the injustices that had been and were being done to her.

Even Vlasta was counted among those who had hurt her, and Petra's feelings gradually veered from pity to resentment. Vlasta should not have left her; she should have stayed and fought back. As the days passed, Petra accepted the idea that Vlasta was as much at fault as her mother. And out of the recesses of her heart, she pulled the never quite forgotten infatuation for Karel, burnished it, and though it was a little battered at the edges, placed it on the empty mantelpiece of her affections.

She was exceedingly serious about all these emotions and designs for behavior; she told herself they were the purgatory through which she had to go. But once or twice the thought occurred to her that she was posing and that the world did not center in the things she wanted and the trials she was undergoing; the thought was painful.

These were the moments when her mind strayed outside the doors of her father's house. In general terms, she knew what had happened, and

Vlasta's influence — even Thomas's abstract and abstruse classroom discussions — had sharpened her intelligence. If her father was beaten along with Minister Dolezhal and his patting hands, if Lida had been thrown out of Vesely's by Karel and a bunch of roughneck workers, this was fine with her; it gave her a chance to gloat. But when she was tired of gloating, she continued to think about it and to ask herself: *What is going to come of it?*

All of this Petra kept to herself. She became quite expert at being sullen. At lunch, which was late because Joseph had come late from St. Nepomuk, she petulantly dallied with her food. The menu was a haphazard conglomeration of leftovers; in view of tomorrow's departure, Lida had not bothered to shop. Joseph made a pretense of enjoying his cold chicken wing which looked obscenely naked with the pimples where the feathers had been, and with little meat on it.

Lida looked at Petra as if she had just discovered her, and then at Joseph, catching his eye, and then back at Petra with a grave, prodding nod.

Joseph separated the thin joints of the wing and seemed to study the mother-of-pearl white of the cartilage. "I've got the most wonderful news for you, Petra," he said.

Petra kept her eyes fixed on a grease spot on the tablecloth in front of her.

"Don't you want to know?" he asked cheerfully.

"Yes," she said, "of course."

Her tone of weariness made his finger tips tingle. Here he was trying to sell her something that other girls her age would go mad about, and she was acting as blasé as if she'd been to the ends of the world and back, with stop-overs at all the famous sights.

"You could be a little more appreciative!" he said, throwing the bones on his plate.

"But you haven't told me," she came back matter-of-factly.

"Now, Petra!" Lida warned.

Petra outlined the grease spot with one tooth of her dessert fork. The spot looked like the rear view of a rabbit, its two long ears sticking out clearly.

"Keep your hands quiet when your father talks to you!"

Petra dropped the fork, the expression of her face saying: Go ahead, punish me!

Joseph reminded himself that the child had not had an easy time of it, either. He forced an encouraging smile into the corners of his eyes, as he said, "We're going on a trip, Petra. We have not had a vacation together since I've come back from the war. Oh, it'll be great fun — damn it, what are you staring at? What's wrong with the table?"

"Nothing."

"Then stop looking that way!"

"Yes, Father."

"Well, aren't you glad? When I was your age —"

"We're leaving tomorrow morning," said Lida. "I have no time to help you pack. You're old enough now, you can do it yourself. There's a suitcase for you in the cellar, your father will bring it up. You'll pack everything you need for a long trip, all your good clothes, winter and summer. Tonight, I'll have a look at your suitcase and see that you've skipped nothing."

"Where are we going?"

"To the Tatras."

"So why do I need my summer clothes?"

"Because I tell you so," said Lida. "I've never yet seen a child so stubborn. It's because of that Vlasta. Ever since —"

"Your mother is right," Joseph mediated carefully. He didn't like the turn the conversation was taking. In fact, he liked nothing about the conversation. "You must not question what your parents tell you. But as it happens, we'll be up quite high in the mountains, and you know it can get pretty hot there, even in winter, once you get above a certain range."

"Yes," said Petra, "I guess so." She buttered a slice of bread, dipped a tiny spoon into the crystal salt barrel, and with annoying slowness dropped grain by grain on the bread.

"When I was your age . . ." Joseph said again. He was not satisfied. He was selling the kid a pack of lies, necessary lies, well-meant lies, lovely lies, and she should show some reaction, some pleasure. ". . . Your age," he swallowed, "I'd have jumped to the ceiling if my father had offered me a trip like that."

Petra put the little spoon back into the salt barrel and glanced up at her father. Though her face was absolutely blank, it was obvious that she was laughing at him.

"But you," he said, "it seems —"

"Are we taking along all the things Mother has packed — to the Tatras?"

The sound of the question was familiar. Not like Thomas's question, but like — like the questions the garage attendant had asked. Joseph reddened. Were they spying on him? Were they spying on him in his own house? His own child?

His fist came down on the table, and the dishes clattered. "What do you mean, Petra?"

A moment later, he had bridled himself. Petra was all right. The Vlasta thing had thrown her off balance. He couldn't afford to let his imagination run wild. "We may be gone a good while," he said. "We'll take everything we need for a long trip. What made you ask?"

What had made her ask? Petra frowned disconcertedly. It had something to do with Vlasta, with the sending away of Vlasta. Vlasta had been here when the silver and all the good things and the jewelry were being packed. Vlasta had known too much, that's why she had been driven away. Now it was clear. They would be gone a long time, hiding somewhere in the mountains, under false names possibly, as people had done when the Nazis were in the country. She'd be living with shepherds and goats, she'd be climbing the rocks and the ridges — fleet, like a beautiful animal, her legs browned and muscular, her eyes sharp and always on the lookout. . . .

But then she saw her mother and her father, and she couldn't quite imagine them as mountaineers — or rather, she could picture them, and herself, locked up in some hut, day after day, month after month, her mother counting the silverware, and her father trying to be pleasant; and she hated them suddenly, both of them.

"Do I have to go?"

The few simple words fell like drops of hot lead into water. They seemed to sizzle.

"I never . . . !" Lida said flatly.

"Of course you'll come with us!" Joseph's worry nearly broke through his fatherly tone. "We're a family. Wherever we go, we go together! Your Uncle Thomas is coming along, too."

Thomas was distinctly not the man to live as a mountain recluse. So it was probably some boring spa or other, and the silver was only packed away because no one would be in the house.

"Uncle Karel, too?"

"No," Lida said grimly, "your Uncle Karel hasn't been nice enough recently for us to treat him to a vacation trip."

"But I like him!" Petra pouted.

Joseph folded his napkin, apparently lost in thought. Then his shrewd, good-natured peasant smile spread over his broad face, and he said, "Petra dear, you're nearly grown up. I think I can afford to tell you the truth. My brother Karel unfortunately has associated with the wrong kind of people, people who have destroyed my business and your mother's business, and who are out to ruin our whole country. What would you think of someone who came into your room and took away everything you have — would you still like him?"

"Mother came into my room and took away Vlasta!"

Joseph picked up the chicken bone and cracked it. It made an ugly sound.

"I want to stay in Rodnik," said Petra.

"Alone?"

"I'm alone most of the time anyhow."

"Get packed," said Joseph.

"Get packed!" said Lida.

Petra said nothing. She rose from the table and walked out.

"You'd better not let her out of the house," said Joseph.

"No," said Lida, "I'd better not. I don't know what has gotten into her. It's terrible. They even spoil your children."

Joseph flexed his hands. He should have beaten the kid, beaten her soundly. The trouble was he had not been around when she was at the age where other children have respect for their parents beaten into their hides.

The last patient had been treated and sent on his way home. Karel threw his white coat, no longer so white, into the laundry bin. He was humming a melody which sounded clear and bright in his mind but which refused to translate itself into a proper tune.

Kitty, he thought, Kitty, Kitty. She had baked a meat loaf and put half of it in a pot and carried it up to St. Nepomuk. That's how she was. The other half of the meat stood warm on the stove in the kitchen. It would be his first meal with Kitty in his own house. He should have wine, real, good wine with it.

The tired doorbell shrilled excitedly. It was too early for Kitty to be back. Dear God, he mumbled, don't let it be another emergency call, let me have this evening in peace, will You?

The landlady downstairs was letting go with a swill of welcome. There were quick steps, not the slow, dragging feet of a late patient. The ever open door to his flat creaked.

"Petra!"

She flopped into a chair, out of breath, her hair awry. She wore no coat, no overshoes, and the mud of the streets had splashed her stockings.

"I ran all the way —" She was still gasping for words. "All the way. Let me stay, please, you must let me stay here, Karel. You're the only one I have. No place else, nowheres." Her eyes grew misty and her hand, clammy, grasped his. "Say that you'll let me —"

He sat down facing her. This was one evening when he definitely would not permit himself to be the butt of Petra's vagaries. She was troubled; but she was always troubled; damn Lida.

"I can't say anything or do anything unless you tell me —"

"There's nothing to tell," she said defiantly.

"Then why did you come running to me?"

Her face wrinkled with effort. She should be able to talk like the grown-ups, saying only as much as was necessary. But what could she tell him? And how much? Karel, her father had said, associated with the wrong

kind of people. They were not wrong for Karel or for her, but wrong for her father, and she wasn't sure what would be wrong for them to know about her father.

"I jumped from the window," she said. "And I ran all the way."

"Using the door was too simple?"

"I don't feel like making jokes," she said soberly. "I once came running to you, and it was a silly thing to have done. I'm older now."

She was. The very fact that she could remind him of the episode and toss it off, proved it. And her face, too, even if you allowed for its being disturbed and peaked, had lost its childhood curves. He should have seen all this the moment she came in; after all, he knew her well, he knew when she was being peevish or hysterical. But if her coming to him was more than a childish escapade, if something serious had occurred or was about to occur . . .

She said, "I didn't walk through the door because they would have noticed me and stopped me."

"Stopped you — why?"

"They wouldn't let me out of the house," she answered evasively.

"Why?"

Again the blank wall.

"Were you being punished for something?"

"No."

"Are you afraid of something?"

She hesitated.

"What are you afraid of?"

She was biting her nails, and between bites said, "I want to stay here. What's so bad about that? Why do you ask questions?"

"Believe me, Petra, I don't like to ask them. But if you want me to help you intelligently, you must give me an idea of what's at the bottom of this!"

She sniffed the smell of the meat loaf. "You want to get rid of me . . ."

"No, I don't!" he said with a protest too loud for his own taste. "Look here — it took you ten or fifteen minutes to get here. By now, your father and mother will have discovered that you're gone, they'll put two and two together and call up here or come in person to fetch you. And what am I to tell them?"

She had stopped nail-biting and sat stiff with fear. "You must tell them that I'm not here."

"I will," he said, wishing that he had a place for her and could park her there instead of having to put her through a third degree. But her place was with her parents, unless — "I will lie to them. I will keep you with me, if you can give me one good reason why I should. People leave their homes

because they can't live there any longer, or because they've been brutally treated, or because they're afraid for their lives. None of that applies in your case, does it?"

She began to squirm in her seat. Her stockings were wrinkled from the running, and she knew she looked a fright. Why was he making this so difficult for her? Why was he driving her away?

"Is it that you're lonely because Vlasta has had to go?"

"Vlasta!" her resentment broke through. "I've forgotten about her."

"Oh, you have!"

She gave a tight little smile as if she knew he was barking up the wrong tree. Then she tried to correct it, to make it winning, and said, "We've always been close to one another, Karel, much closer than uncle and niece. We've had confidence in one another —"

"You don't have much confidence in me tonight," he said, and saying it, felt he was unfair. For a moment, he had thought that her old possessive coquettishness had returned; but it wasn't that at all. Whatever her predicament, it became all the worse since she couldn't talk about it. He would have to have patience. He would have to let her stay in the flat with Kitty, and find a bed for himself somewhere else. He only hoped that the piece of meat loaf would be enough to feed the three of them.

"Just one night," she pleaded, "only tonight. After that I'll leave you alone."

"And why just one night? Things can't be so desperate if you're willing to go back tomorrow!"

"Tomorrow they'll be gone."

Her heart turned icy the moment she said it. She hadn't wanted to say it, he had drawn it out of her; and what would he think now, what would he ask next?

"Gone?"

But there must be other people, she thought, strangers, who knew about it, too. If you went to a spa in the Tatras, to a village or town anywhere in the country, you had to buy tickets and the ticket sellers knew; you made reservations and the hotel clerks knew, you had to register in the new place, and the police knew.

"They're going to the Tatras," she said lightly, and to make it appear more trivial, added, "Uncle Thomas is traveling with them. Father says it's his first vacation since he's back from the war. But I don't want to go. I want to stay here." And, suddenly screaming, "I — don't — want — to go!"

"All right, all right, Petra! Nobody is forcing you." He sighed a little. Finally he was getting the story, and it was far less complicated than Petra had made him expect. He could visualize his brother's house, the somber

rooms, Lida reproaching Joseph, Joseph reproaching himself, the complete despair and depression to which the Revolution must have reduced them. That was the other side of the coin, the one you didn't see so readily when you marched in with a committee of workers and took over or when you stood on Wenceslas Square and cheered. To have to live at this juncture with Joseph and Lida was anything but jolly; nor was greater joy to be had from being cooped up with them in a couple of hotel rooms in a mountain resort out of season. Thomas was making a mistake if he thought that a trip in their company would help him. And Petra would naturally want to escape that permanent pall of doom.

"Would you want me to talk to your father about it?" Karel suggested.

"No!" — horrified.

"But don't you see — we must tell them! They feel responsible for you. They won't leave unless they know you're well taken care of."

Petra rocked back in her chair. They wouldn't leave without her. Of course, they wouldn't. . . . But then she heard the voices. *Be packed tonight! We're leaving tomorrow! Get packed! Get — packed!*

"They will!" she said firmly, as if she had looked inside their minds.

Karel paused. The girl wasn't dreaming that up! Why the haste? And why had they wanted to keep her in the house so that she had to jump from the window?

The door was opened softly.

Kitty came in. With the naturalness of someone who has moved into a place to stay she called out her "Hello!" from the door, went to the kitchen to deposit the pot, hung up her hat and coat in the foyer, and then entered the room.

"How nice of you to visit, Petra!" she said.

Petra stared from her to Karel, from Karel to her. Her lips clamped tight. She had to throw up and wouldn't give in to herself. She sat, miserable, rubbing her cold-reddened knuckles, and knowing why Karel had asked those many questions, why he hadn't dared to refuse her point-blank, and yet had closed her out as ruthlessly as if he had given her a simple, honest No.

She managed to get up. She managed to speak. "I'll be going, I guess. You won't see me again. Good-by, Karel. Good-by, Kitty."

She stood forlornly.

"But, Petra!" said Kitty.

Karel frowned. What was in her mind — *You won't see me again. . . .*

"Petra, darling!" said Kitty. "I'll make you a cup of hot tea. You look as if you could use it —"

Karel shook his head at Kitty. "Where are you planning to go, Petra?"

"Home," she said with a voice that needed tears but could find none.

"I'll walk you."

"You stay with her!" Petra said. "Don't worry about me. I'll be getting out of your life without having to jump into the river. We're all packed, silver, jewelry, everything. The papers are burned —"

Then she broke down. She covered her face with her dirty cold hands.

Karel tasted the salt. He had bitten his lips bloody. He gathered Petra into his arms and stroked her disheveled hair and let her cry. Then he led her to the bedroom and made her lie down and covered her and kissed her forehead and wet cheeks.

When he came out he said to Kitty, "I'll have to go out, now. Don't leave her alone, give her something to eat in a little while. Don't let anyone in. Don't answer the phone. Lock the door."

Kravat boarded with a glassworker's family in one of the small houses near the Suska River. Kravat, with his native horse sense, his intuitive grasp of problems and personalities, would know what had to be done. It was to Kravat that Karel, without so much as a second thought, was turning.

Already the lights in the windows were being switched off one by one; people here got up early and worked hard and went to bed early; Rodnik was really a harsh and drab place to live in, and Karel wondered faintly what had made him grow so attached to it. He was walking at a fast clip, he had reached the market square with the onion-towered church of the Reverend Trnka, and with the post office at the corner. A solitary yellow bulb gleamed inside the dirty-white cubicle set against the post office wall — Rodnik's only public pay phone.

Out of the dark, a tall uniformed figure materialized and with measured steps moved forward to cross Karel's path.

"Good evening, Dr. Benda!" said Police Sergeant Ruziczka.

Karel, distracted, stopped and gave him a curt, "'evening!"

"Out on a late call?" the man asked.

Karel suddenly realized that he was without his bag. "No — just walking."

"That's good," said the policeman. "The air is fine tonight. The trouble with people is that we're indoors too much. Me, for instance — I like being on night duty. I look up at the stars, and the sky's a higher ceiling than we have in any house. That's Cassiopeia up there, and over there, if you follow my finger, Castor and Pollux. Those old Greeks, they had imagination." Ruziczka chuckled. "Know anything about stars?"

"Very little, I'm afraid," said Karel.

"Well," said Ruziczka, "then I'll be saying good night."

"Good night," said Karel.

The policeman touched his cap and moved on and soon disappeared, and finally the sound of his boots was gone, too.

Karel walked on slowly. Gradually, his steps became more halting and in front of the church he stood still altogether. He was thinking of other nights, long ago, of other meetings with other policemen, when his heart had sat in his throat although he had talked to them with equal casualness, hiding behind it the destination and purpose of his visits. Now he had nothing to hide. He could talk to the police about stars, about anything, as one citizen talks to another. It was a new time.

For him it was.

He sighed. He brushed off a little snow that still clung to the bench next to the church door, and sat down. It was a horrible thing to have to live with people, to meet them, make conversation, work with them, and always be on your guard. After a while it began to affect you, however good your cause. There were the sudden hot rushes from your heart to the tips of your limbs; the uncanny sensation that made the hair on the back of your neck bristle; the cramp in the stomach at a knock at the door. Even sleep didn't help when it came; the dreams were worse than the lying awake. He had lived that way for years; he knew. . . .

He let his thoughts trail off before permitting them to reach the point toward which they were working.

Now take Petra, he started from a new angle. She was too young to have broken the problem down into its components, to have classified its ethics and measured them with whatever yardstick one applied in such cases. And though Joseph and Lida had done everything to frustrate the child and make her hate them, she had held out to the last and up to the end had not admitted, not even to herself, what was so patently clear. . . .

He laughed wryly — Dr. Karel Benda, survivor of Buchenwald, worker and helper and healer, treader on the thin path of righteousness, taking his cues from a child!

Yes, it was easy to stand jammed in a mass of people and to hail with them their own strength and to welcome with them the new era when the hundred-year-old prophecy of the two bearded German gentlemen was coming true. But that was not the end of it. The trouble had just started. It was relatively easy, yet, to join in confiscating your own brother's possessions — after all, you didn't take them for yourself, although you realized that in taking them you cut the marrow out of his bones.

Kravat would have no such compunctions. The beatings you got in life gave different people different educations. Kravat would act. Kravat would make sure that a possible enemy of the state would stay where he was supposed to stay and not skip around the country or out of it. Happy Kravat,

who saw first things first and only those first things which mattered to him and to the people to whom he belonged!

But it was ridiculous to type Joseph with as solemn a phrase as *Enemy of the State*. While he had the Benda Works and controlled the making of glass around Rodnik, he was dangerous; now he was only a paper cut-out of his former self, stripped of substance and power. So he went across the border, to England or to America or any place where they specialized in coddling has-beens. What damage could he do? How long would it take until his audiences grew bored with his repeating the empty slogans of an extinct order? His money would give out, and the charitable contributions would decrease, and in the end, he and Lida would start some little glass business, or something. In fact, it was better to have such people out of the country.

And yet, Joseph had his capabilities. As he had used his position as National Administrator, as he had finagled his election, as he had resigned with a purpose, so he would work on, wherever he was, to gain back the Benda Works — like a squirrel in a cage. Joseph had the capabilities; but what chance did he have? No chance at all, just the compulsion that came from the Works. The Works were Joseph's life, the Works were his country, his home, his reason for being. Which made him the Enemy — my brother, the Enemy.

My brother, whose every emotion I know, whose naked skin I saw trembling before my eyes, whose heartbeat I listened to. My brother who stood at my side when the Nazis knocked at the gate — yes, that's when we made the mistake. That's when we were given the wrong precepts. That's when we learned that nothing is more despicable than the man who informs on his brother.

God, how low can you sink? But there is no God, thank God. If there were, He would raise His gentle brows considerably over Dr. Karel Benda, adulterer and informer, all in the family, of course.

He knew he was doing the wrong thing right when, instead of continuing toward the river, he crossed the square and entered the phone booth. He dropped a coin in the box and demanded Joseph's number.

"Karel!" he heard the tinny voice at the other end of the wire. "Finally! We've been trying to reach you for well over an hour. Is Petra with you?"

"Yes."

"That damned kid! Running out on us like that, and it's not the first time. I've been telling Lida not to worry, I knew she'd be at your place. Will you bring her back here, right away — no, never mind. I'll come over myself."

"No need for that, Joseph."

"But you're a busy person and work hard. Why should you have to bother?"

"She is not going back to you."

There was a slight pause, then, "Listen, Karel, Petra has her moods; all right — maybe we were a little strict with her. But you can't side with her against her own parents —"

Karel said nothing.

"Are you there, Karel?"

"Yes."

"I'll be over in ten minutes."

"I wouldn't trouble if I were you. I have her in a safe place. She's going to stay in Rodnik."

Again a pause. Then Joseph's voice came back, its panic audible despite the distorted sound of the overaged phone. "What are you trying to do? What are you nationalizing now — my child? I'll call the police —"

"You're leaving tomorrow, aren't you?"

"We're — we're going to the Tattras."

"So I heard."

The panic changed to sweet reasonableness. "That's why I'm so insistent. At any other time I wouldn't mind her staying with you. . . . God knows, after what happened here it's difficult for us to give her the fun she's entitled to. . . ."

"Well, then — if you'll let her be with me for a night, what's the objection to having her be with me for two or three weeks or as long as you plan to visit the Tattras?"

"Because I'm her father! Because you can't take her from me! Because —"

"You're not coming back?"

There was a heavy, rattling breath. The "We'll be back all right!" that followed it sounded almost normal.

"Petra will be here for you when you return."

"Karel?"

"Yes?"

"There'll be a time when I pay you back for this, pay all of you. . . ."

He seemed to be sobbing in a paroxysm of fury or in pain.

The sweat was stinging in the corners of Karel's eyes. He clamped his free hand around the doorknob of the booth; the knob was the only firm thing in a swaying world.

"Karel?"

"Yes —"

"You won't even let me say good-by to her?"

"It's better you don't. She's asleep."

"Is she well-covered? Did you tuck her in?"

"Yes."

"She throws herself around in her sleep. You must watch that."

"I will."

"Karel?"

"Yes, Joseph?"

"Let me see her. . . ."

"I have no time. I have to go up to Thomas's. Good-by, Joseph. Good luck!"

"Karel . . ."

He hung up.

For a minute, he leaned against the planking of the booth, staring at the numbers and filthy words and doodlings penciled there. Then he buttoned his coat and stepped out into the cold. He ran most of the way to St. Nepomuk.

"Why do you want to leave the country, Thomas?"

Thomas's pajamas had grown too wide for him; there was a button missing at the top, and the few meager hairs on his bony chest stuck out pitifully. He pulled up a pillow and, half-sitting, reclined against it.

Karel looked at the empty bed next to Thomas's. It was a telling argument, Thomas really didn't need to say anything.

"Why did you come?" Thomas asked back. "Can't you let people go their ways in peace? That's what I object to in the new setup: Everybody who guessed right now regards himself a missionary or an official or what not and mixes in everybody else's affairs."

"When did you make up your mind?"

"Today."

"Are you sure you considered it thoroughly?"

"I'm tired," Thomas said languidly. "Very tired. And I have to be up and around early. Joseph's picking me up at eight, so I'd appreciate it if you'd let me have a night's sleep."

"Have you considered what it would mean to you — living in exile once more? The first time wasn't so fruitful, either —"

"You can be in your own country, and be just as good as exiled, just as good as dead."

Karel sat down on Kitty's bed, very warily, as if he disliked disturbing its untouched smoothness. "You should give the country a chance," he said slowly, "and yourself, too. You belong here, you can help us, contribute something!"

"Me?" Thomas latched his fingers behind his head and grinned. He looked both wizened and boyish, a sickening combination. "I'm a traitor,

haven't you heard? I got it from Elinor and I got it from Villner, personally."

"Villner is a doctrinaire fool. And he doesn't have the last word in the matter. We'll go back to Stanek, you and I, and talk it over with him —"

"And make my work a political football again? That's happened before, you know! A book doesn't get any better by being kicked with the left foot instead of the right. I don't want to be in a place where a book is accepted or condemned on the basis of its usefulness in the current political situation."

"You've lived in other parts of the world. Do you know any place where it's any different?"

Thomas failed to answer.

"So why do you want to jump from the frying pan into the fire?"

"I don't want to jump. I want to have peace. I don't want to have to take sides and choose — between you and Joseph, this crowd and that, this philosophy and the other. Let me go, Karel — let me try. . . ."

"But by going you choose sides, don't you see?"

"Maybe it looks that way to you; it doesn't, to me. I just want a change of atmosphere. Here, everything you touch clashes with something else —"

He held his palms to his ears as if to shut out the unbearable clang.

"It'll get quieter soon," said Karel.

"What kind of quiet? . . . And I'm sick of being alone! Being alone in your own country is worse than being alone anywhere else. In America, at least, they'll look at me as a curiosity. Here they don't look at me at all!"

"But you aren't alone! There are millions of people here, waiting to hear from you, waiting for you to teach them, to entertain them, to make their lives richer —"

"You and your millions! You know what you're doing? You're establishing the world's biggest kindergarten with sweetness and light everywhere; *your* sweetness, *your* light . . . Oh, let me go!"

Was it worth while? thought Karel. Whenever he dug near the root of the problem, Thomas wiggled away. But then he envisaged Thomas living abroad; depending on handouts from Joseph; misunderstood, mismanaged, mishandled; sinking, slowly at first, later more rapidly, until he ended up as a hack without a soul of his own. Worse yet — while Joseph out of the country was merely another bankrupt petty politician, Thomas could and would be used. I love him too much for that, Karel thought, suddenly chafing under his own accountability. If Kitty had been a millstone around Thomas's neck, she also had been his anchor. Now Thomas was drifting like a big rubber ball, the ebb tide sucking him out to sea; and

Karel felt the peculiar panting despair of a swimmer at the limit of his endurance, trying to catch up with the elusive thing bobbing on the waves.

He got up from Kitty's bed and straightened the spread.

Thomas yawned pointedly.

Karel leaned over him, as a doctor leans over a patient, and said, "I'm sorry I have to tell you this. But Kitty and I were lying to you when we met you in Prague. We did see Vlasta."

Thomas's hands shot out and tore at Karel's lapels and pulled him down close. "You miserable hypocrite — why do you mix in my life! She came to see me and you sent her away! She came to see me and you took me back here, into this — this . . ." He let go of Karel and pointed at the empty bed, the empty room, the emptiness.

"Because she confirmed what you know yourself: That she couldn't love you."

"You're lying again!"

"Would she have gone away without seeing you if she loved you?"

Thomas had slid down from the pillow. He was lying sideways on the bed, now, in the fetal position, his arms hooked around his scrawny knees, his face twitching.

The ones that starved to death in their bunks in Buchenwald had often lain like that. In a sense, it was a case of starvation, thought Karel — self-induced, but nonetheless cruel.

"That you gave up your wife, Thomas, and spilled your love on another woman who couldn't return it, doesn't mean you've lost your capacity for love and for being loved. It's all part of the same picture, the same illness; the process of recuperation will take care of all of it. And if you should need a crutch to lean on, I think I can serve you better than Joseph can. . . ."

He dimmed the lights, except for the heavily shaded small lamp on the night table between the two beds.

Thomas stretched himself and rolled over on his back. "Give me one of your pills," he said, "and leave me a prescription for a bottle of them."

"All right. . . ." Karel went to the bathroom and brought back a glass of water, handed the pill to his brother, and watched him swallow it and gulp down the water. Then he took off his jacket, loosened his tie, kicked off his shoes, and lay down on Kitty's bed. He would be spending the night in Kitty's bed, after all, he thought sourly.

"Are you guarding me?" Thomas said, his voice drowsy.

Karel switched off the night lamp. Outside the window, the bare branches of a tree trembled softly against the night. "Guarding you? I have no bed! Petra's staying at my flat with Kitty."

"Are you — guarding me?" And then some mumbled words, impossible to understand.

"You're free to go, Thomas. I let Joseph go, too. So make up your own mind."

Karel listened to the regular, open-mouthed breathing coming from his brother. He couldn't tell whether Thomas had heard him or not.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THROUGH the large plate glass of the waiting room, Joseph saw the silver-painted DC-3 of the Czechoslovak Airlines. It taxied up the runway from the hangars and stopped, its blunt nose pointing toward the sky. The captain pulled down the cockpit window, stuck his head out, and spoke to one of the mechanics on the ground. The baggage compartment door was opened, a luggage cart was wheeled onto the field, and two men began the loading job with a nonchalance which somehow riled Joseph.

"And where's your friend?" he heard Lida say.

"He'll come."

Joseph almost wished Dolezhal wouldn't come and so give him a pretense for calling off the whole thing. But then what? Wait until they got around to putting him in Pankrac? Actually, Dolezhal was quite sensible in postponing his arrival to the last minute; it decreased the chance of his being questioned by any of the detectives who surely were keeping the airport under surveillance.

The sparsely furnished waiting room was empty but for a young, pasty-faced woman sitting on the other bench, obviously afraid of flying, and holding a new infant on her lap. Even the girl behind the ticket counter had gone off somewhere, for lack of customers.

The infant, with its beet-red head, started to wail, a thin, catlike crying.

"I hope that doesn't keep up during the whole trip," said Joseph. God knows how long they would have to be in the air until they found a decent landing field at a safe distance from the border.

Lida, her eyes swollen, regarded him reproachfully. "Poor little thing; it's probably got the colic."

She went over to the helpless mother, picked up the weakly struggling child, and warmed it against her bosom. The baby's head peeping over her shoulder looked remarkably like a Rhesus monkey's, except for its coloring.

Through a glass-paneled door leading into some corridor, Joseph noticed loitering customs officials and border police. They seemed to pay no attention to him; but why didn't they go on to their business, to the international part of the airport building? Their disinterest could be show; they might just be waiting to pounce the moment Dolezhal appeared.

Lida came back to him and sat down, her flat, gray face averted. She was weeping softly, again; the baby, ugly though it was, must have brought memories flocking back to her mind.

Joseph laid his hand on her arm, trying to quiet her.

The weeping became intermittent and finally ceased. She blew her nose, and, crushing her handkerchief nervously, said: "You and your family! Oh, I hate them! I hate Dolezhal, and you, too. . . ."

He nudged her and nodded toward the woman, whose infant had begun to whimper once more.

Lida lowered her voice, but its slimmed volume was bursting with hostility. "Your fine, humane brother Karel. It took him a long time, but now he's Number One man in Rodnik. And you let him! You let him rob you of your Works, of my inheritance, the house, our child. You and your grand strategy —"

Though at the breaking point, her voice refused to break. She had to say this if she choked over it. "And the great Spokesman, who would mouth your wonderful ideas! That double-talking, seesawing freak who never yet made a decision of his own —"

"Lida, darling! What's the sense of crying over that, now? It's life or death — my life, your life —"

"Life . . ." she whispered. "Without Petra?"

"Shut up, for God's sake!" he hissed back. "Don't you think I feel rotten enough as it is?"

The young mother looked up from diapering her baby, her eyes wide with curiosity. Lida walked over to her. "Let me help you," she said. She folded the triangle expertly and pinned it loosely.

"I don't know how to thank you," said the girl. "You're so kind. I've never flown before — and with a baby! My husband has a new job in Bratislava, and his office arranged for the air tickets."

"He must be an important man!" Lida said patronizingly.

"He is!" the girl proudly answered. "He used to be just a bookkeeper; now he's been made manager of a big factory."

The baby's perfectly shaped tiny feet kicked comfortably. Dirty little Communist bastard, thought Lida. And her own child wasn't any better — hadn't Petra turned against her and betrayed her?

"Well!" she said, not even bothering to conceal her anger, "Some get up in the world and some go down, isn't that so?"

"You were most kind, thank you so much!" the girl was saying, but Lida wasn't listening; she was on her way back to Joseph.

"So why didn't you pick up your famous brother, the Spokesman?" she began, on reaching him. "If you had, you would have been two against me! Would that have made you feel better?"

A short, squat man with a swarthy complexion and a beaked nose that seemed to pull his face forward entered the waiting room. He was clutching a shabby briefcase.

"There are people —" Joseph said warningly.

"People, people!" she said under her breath. "Always people! People came and took what we had! But it's your fault. When I was with Petra, she was mine; then you came, with your brothers, and you had to have her away from me, in Prague; and you brought back that Vlasta woman; and you always took Petra's side against me."

"I don't want to hear any more about Petra."

Lida glared.

"How could I have taken Thomas with us?" he went on darkly. "Karel was at Thomas's house, and God knows what he would have done if I crossed his intentions. He's got the power, now. . . ."

He fell silent. He had deprived his escape of the little sense it made beyond the mere physical dash across the border. Nothing of him would live on; his child was no longer his; his ideas would die stillborn.

Lida sat hunched over her pocketbook, which contained a small fortune. "And what makes you think," she asked relentlessly, "that Karel is going to let us get away? We still have fifteen minutes until flight time. He's a sadist, I tell you, like all of them. He's going to let us dangle, and at the last minute —"

Joseph chewed at the inside of his cheek. This was another fear he had carried with him since last night.

"But maybe not," Lida speculated. "Maybe he wants us out, because as long as you're here he won't be able to enjoy his acquisitions — sensitive soul!"

"Come on, Lida — why do you want to talk about him?"

"I suppose you'd still like to find excuses for what he's done?"

He shut his eyes and wished to God he had some sort of lids to clamp over his ears, too. And this would go on day in and day out as the weeks passed into months, the months into years, until death do us part. . . . And she would be right in everything she might say! Somewhere along the line he had made one mistake, and out of it had grown all the others in an inescapable chain reaction. But *when* was it that he had committed this basic error? When he was born the oldest? When he allowed his father to press him into the business? When he returned from England? When?

There were voices behind him. Someone called his name. He started up, wheeled around —

"Hello, Joseph Benda, my friend! You haven't been waiting too long? I was detained — last-minute business — you know how it is . . ."

Dolezhal, a brand-new sports cap sitting horizontally on his hair like a pancake on top of a cauliflower, pushed his little wife forward and propelled her toward Lida.

"Margot dear! I want to introduce you to Lida Benda, of whom I have told you so much — and only the most flattering things!" he added, his firm glance directed at the flaccid area around Lida's eyes. "And where is my little Petra?"

"We've had to leave her behind," said Joseph.

"You've *had* to?" A shadow of uncertainty flickered over his set face. "You must tell me about that, Joseph — but not now. We must —"

The Airlines girl had returned to her counter. A loud-speaker announced the imminent departure of the flight to Bratislava. The young mother, her baby asleep in her arms, stepped to the counter to check in, as did the man with the beaked nose and the briefcase. At this moment two men with soldierly bearing, though in mufti, appeared at the door. They looked over the scene and then came toward Dolezhal.

Joseph stood rooted in his tracks. It was six minutes before flight time.

Dolezhal laughed booming. His hand stabbed at Joseph, "What's the matter, my boy? Nervous? Ah, flying makes some people nervous, doesn't it, Margot dear? Mr. Pokorny — Mr. Kramarsh —" the two bowed stiffly, "Mr. and Mrs. Benda — and you know Mrs. Dolezhal, of course. . . . Mr. Pokorny and Mr. Kramarsh are going with us — to Bratislava. They've been working hard, too."

Then he shepherded his party to the counter, casting a glad eye at the girl behind it. She was really quite pretty, and her uniform accented the softness of her hair-do.

The baby was crying again, but the muffled roar of the propellers drowned its whining. The air was bumpy. Lida's mouth was a thin scar in her face; she sat pale and concentrated on the misery of her soul and the convolutions of her stomach. Prague lay behind them, its last outskirts had melted into the dim horizon, and they were flying over an undulating land, whitish gray and dark-spotted where the snow had already been soaked into the ground, crossed by the black lines of the roads and the trees alongside them, by the tiny, straight strings of the railroad tracks, and the meandering curves of the rivers and brooks.

Joseph studied the landscape. They were flying southeast, at about a hundred and seventy miles an hour, with fairly strong headwinds. He was

not yet captaining the plane, and there was no real reason to worry about these items. He was just trying to avoid looking at the two empty seats ahead of him, Petra's and Thomas's. The muscles of his neck began to ache from the awkward turning of his head toward the porthole; he settled back in his seat and stared forward, past the painful memory of the seats, at the door to the cockpit.

Under the inscription CAPTAIN, a name-plate was inserted: B. Prochaska. There was no name-plate under co-pilot — the man was apparently so new in the service that none had been made for him. Joseph thought idly about this B. Prochaska — what kind of man he was, what he would do in a few minutes. Prochaska was probably an old Army flyer, possibly had even been in Joseph's squadron. There had been several Prochaskas, it was not an unusual name. There was a likelihood that, because of this background, Prochaska might play along; if he was intelligent, he would. Neither Mr. Pokorny nor Mr. Kramarsh looked like people who would accept a No without getting tough about it. Still, B. Prochaska, whoever he was, might cause a good bit of trouble. He might refuse to get out of his seat, there might be a struggle, the plane might get out of control. . . . Joseph felt the moisture in the palms of his hands. During the war, he had always wondered how it felt to be in a crashing plane. It didn't take long, but those last seconds — were you conscious to the end? What did you try to do when the earth rushed at you, what went through your mind? Or did your brain snap mercifully and black you out?

And I, with my bad heart, he thought suddenly. No: Karel had said his heart was all right, and it must be, to have lived through a day like yesterday. Only his nerves were blasted, and the next minutes wouldn't improve them.

Without warning, Lida bent forward and retched. She had held on too long, and had missed the chance to grab for the paper container under the seat. Joseph looked on passively. A sour smell rose from the floor.

"You *could* have helped me!" she said, swallowing.

"I'll bring you some water."

As he started up from his seat, the door to the cockpit came open, and stooping his head, the co-pilot emerged. He was a youngish man, excessively freckled, with eyes of nondescript blue that reminded Joseph of a large order of glass in that color which he had sold to some fancy store in New York. They called it Wedgwood Blue; but it wasn't Wedgwood.

The co-pilot passed down the aisle, lurched against Lida's seat and said, "Ah, now, madame! We'll get out of this rough air in no time at all, no time at all!" Then he pushed on and disappeared into the toilet. Mr. Pokorny and Mr. Kramarsh got up and, hanging on to the shelves where the pillows and blankets were kept, balanced themselves and waited.

Dolezhal came over to Joseph. He glanced at Lida, "Sorry, Mrs. Benda, you're not feeling so well. Your first flight, I take it?"

Lida nodded mechanically.

"Well," he said, "it's the time of the year. We didn't pick it, you know?" He laughed a little, but grew serious immediately. His face was tense, its large planes showed a net of wrinkles, parchmentlike.

"Ready, Joseph?"

B. Prochaska, Joseph kept thinking. The whole thing seemed improbable, now, insane, sure to fail. He hadn't flown a plane since 1944; he should have told that to Dolezhal. The DC-3 was nothing but the old Dakota transport; but who could tell what new gadgets the Airline had built in, and what kinks this particular crate had? Only Prochaska knew the plane well enough, Prochaska who was responsible for the ship and who would fight.

"Let's go!" said Dolezhal. It was a command.

The co-pilot came out of the toilet and went forward. He gave Dolezhal a thin, apprehensive smile. Joseph levered himself up, supporting himself heavily on the armrests of his seat.

"That's fine," said Dolezhal. "That's fine!"

The door to the cockpit swung gently with the movement of the plane. Joseph saw the co-pilot slip back into his seat. He saw the frowning profile of B. Prochaska as the captain leaned over to the co-pilot and said a few short words, apparently about the door left open. Mr. Pokorny and Mr. Kramarsh, their right hands in the side pockets of their jackets, pushed through the door.

The beak-nosed man looked up, puzzled. "Do they let you go in there?" he asked of no one in particular. "I always wanted to see —"

"Now!" Dolezhal said to Joseph.

Joseph stumbled forward. Holding on to the narrow walls of the gangway beyond the door, he saw Mr. Kramarsh press a pistol against the back of Captain Prochaska. Mr. Pokorny was talking to the captain, but the whirl of the engines was too strong up here to let Joseph hear what he was saying.

Prochaska, however, was talking over the noise. "Stop the kidding!" he said. "Can't you see I'm busy?"

Joseph entered the cockpit.

"Get up, man!" Pokorny admonished. "This thing is loaded. And I shoot to kill."

Prochaska looked for aid to his co-pilot. The boy kept his nondescript eyes discreetly ahead. Prochaska was still flying the plane. His head was now turned sideways, he was searching over the ground.

"For the last time," Pokorny shouted, "get up!"

The plane banked steeply. It seemed to slide off, standing on its left

wing-tip. Someone in the cabin screamed. Mr. Kramarsh nearly lost his footing. The co-pilot looked white and was trying to twist the wheel on his stick.

Mr. Pokorny grabbed the captain's collar. Simultaneously Mr. Kramarsh cracked the butt of his pistol over Prochaska's skull. The captain slumped forward.

The co-pilot had let go of his stick and was holding his hands in front of his eyes. The whole air around the plane was alive with a high-pitched, interminable, inhuman roar. The plane, still on its wing, kept falling.

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph!" cried Mr. Pokorny. "Do something!"

Joseph lay almost flat on his back. He felt violently sick. As through a milky screen, he saw the tangled legs of Mr. Pokorny and Mr. Kramarsh, and the bobbing head of the co-pilot who was strapped in and had to keep sitting where he was. How long yet? Fifteen seconds? Ten?

Then he felt himself scramble up, push aside the hampering bodies of Mr. Kramarsh and Mr. Pokorny, and reach over Prochaska's back. His fingers grabbed hold of the captain's stick. Bracing his foot against Kramarsh's chest, he managed to turn the wheel to the right, and pulled back the stick and with it the captain's inert body.

Slowly, maddeningly slowly, the plane righted itself and leveled off.

With his left, Joseph unstrapped the captain. "Take him back!" he ordered Pokorny and Kramarsh, and as the unconscious Prochaska was dragged, feet last, out of the cockpit, Joseph settled in the captain's chair. They were a hundred and fifty feet off the ground.

The two American pursuit planes were dipping their wings, signaling.

Joseph raised his hand and waved to them. Underneath him stretched a big city, the buildings in its center looking like teeth drilled open by a very industrious and thorough dentist. Out of the haze to the west rose the large, blurred triangle of the airfield.

The Americans dipped wings again. One of them moved ahead of Joseph. Joseph cut his speed. He lowered the flaps and the wheels and heard the rush of air beat against them.

"Okay, now, Czecho," a voice sounded through his ear phones. "Use Runway 22. Do you hear me? Use Runway 22. Roger."

Joseph swallowed. It would be the last time that anyone called him "Czecho."

He picked up the microphone. "Czecho to Tower. I hear you. Coming in on Runway 22."

The pursuit plane ahead of him zoomed upwards, back into the sky. Slightly to the right, Joseph saw the dotted white line that marked the start of the runway. He banked the plane gently. Then runway and plane were

beautifully aligned. He floated down. There was only the lightest jar as the wheels touched ground.

Joseph fell back, exhausted. His blood was singing in his ears. He felt no elation, no triumph, though he should have been feeling it. Detached, he watched the co-pilot take the plane off the runway and cut the motors.

The silence, then, fell on him like a great white pillow. He unstrapped his belt, but he did not get up. Lida came into the cockpit and kissed him, her lips wet. She still smelled a little sourly. Then he heard Dolezhal's mellow voice, saw the small hand stab in front of his eyes, "Well done, my boy! You saved all our lives. I'll always be grateful, you can count on me!"

"How's Prochaska?" said Joseph.

"Up and around!" laughed Dolezhal. "Up and around and fuming. We had to tie him up a bit."

Then they all went into the cabin. The beak-nosed man was clutching at his briefcase and asking, "Where are we? Won't anyone tell me, where are we?"

"Munich!" said Mr. Pokorny.

"But I have to get to Bratislava!"

"That's your worry," said Mr. Kramarsh.

The young mother was cradling her child and looking at everybody out of big, frightened eyes. Lida walked past her without even glancing at her; she went past Captain Prochaska, who sat huddled in the last seat, his face masklike in its contempt, a bump the size of a half-tomato on his skull.

Mr. Pokorny unlocked the door and swung it open. Outside, a jeep was driving up, and some Germans in blue work clothes were rolling up a platform.

A tall young lieutenant with a mouth much too small for the rest of him uncoiled himself out of the jeep's front seat. "Where's the captain of this plane?" he asked sternly.

Dolezhal had stepped onto the platform.

"The captain, I'm afraid, is a little incapacitated," he said. "Where's the commanding officer of this airport?"

"And who the hell are you?" bristled the lieutenant.

"I am Bohumil Dolezhal, formerly Cabinet Minister in the Government of the Czechoslovak Republic."

"Well," said the lieutenant, not quite understanding what this was all about, "well — well!"

Dolezhal was on the ground. "We've taken over this plane and have flown here to seek asylum — and freedom!" he said.

"Well," said the lieutenant, "I don't know. . . ." Then it dawned on him that maybe he had a big sensation here, with press interviews and a promotion and a medal. He ordered the soldier in the back of the jeep to get

off his ass and mount guard over the plane and its passengers and crew. "Hop in, sir!" he said to Dolezhal.

Joseph saw the jeep bounce off over the field, leaving dust and a smell of oil and gasoline in its tracks.

"Might as well sit down," he said, turning back into the cabin of the plane. Lida's disappointed face loomed large at his side. She was opening her mouth to speak, and he knew she would make him squirm, and he wished he had the courage and the energy to shut her up.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The schism between the ethics of life and the ethics of art goes back to the age when the design on a piece of furniture became design for its own sake, when ritual turned into drama, when the work song was split and the music divorced from the labor in the field, when words that called for action were emancipated from daily life and transformed into entertainment. Since then, art has presupposed a leisure class, and until today leisure has been available only at the expense of those who work to give it to others. Ironically, the moment a class achieved the desirable state of parasitic existence and could afford leisure, it has been wont to be forced out of business.

Now God has given man, among other troublesome properties, a conscience. The average *Homo parasiticus* manages to shed it; but the artist without conscience ceases to be an artist. The artist must become a critic, a gravedigger to the class which has nurtured him and of which he is an admittedly second-rate member, which buys his books and his paintings, listens to his music and his plays, and bedecks him with the court jester's bells.

And then, when he has helped to cripple the hand that fed him — what?

I hope my readers will bear with me if I, as a Czech, quote a German authority. It is a German who long ago fought his way to world citizenship: Heinrich Heine. He felt this schism so deeply that, about a hundred years ago, he wrote:

It is with the greatest concern and apprehension that I make the confession that the future belongs to the Communists — and this is not merely a pretense! Indeed, only with horror and disgust can I think of an epoch in which these sinister iconoclasts will come to power; with their callused hands they will smash mercilessly the marble statues so dear to my heart; they will break all the whimsical toys and fragile works of art so beloved by the poet; they'll cut down my laurel groves and plant potatoes in their place; and alas! my *Buch der Lieder* will serve some

greengrocer as raw material for paper bags, into which he will pour the coffee or the snuff for the old women of the future. Oh yes, I can see all that coming, and I am gripped by an unspeakable sadness when I think of the ruin with which the victorious proletariat threatens my poetry and the whole old romantic world.

And yet, I'll also confess quite openly that this same Communism, so inimical to all my interests and inclinations, exercises a fascination on my soul against which I cannot defend myself; a voice rises up inside of me in its favor, a voice which I cannot silence.

It is the voice of Logic. I am caught in the web of a terrible syllogism, and if I cannot disprove the premise that all men have the right to eat, then I am forced to subject myself to all its consequences. When I begin to think of this, I am in danger of losing my mind; I see all the demons of truth dance triumphantly around me, and in the end, a magnanimous despair takes hold of my heart and I proclaim loudly: This old society, it has been judged and condemned long ago! May justice be done! May it be destroyed, this old world, where innocence was annihilated, where cynicism flourished, where man was exploited by man!

And blessed be that greengrocer who one day will make little paper bags out of the pages of my poetry and who will pour into them the coffee and the snuff for the poor, good old women who in our present world of injustice are generally denied such comforts.

Poor Heine! He was wrong about the details — his books were not burned by the proletariat — but he was intrinsically right in predicting that the intellectual and his ideas will be subordinated to the greatest good of the greatest number in a society in which potatoes take precedence over laurels.

After that may come another age, I hope, in which the schism can be bridged, in which art and life once more are integrated — but I'm afraid it will be after my time. . . .

FROM THOMAS BENDA: *Essay on Freedom*

"I'M GLAD you came that promptly," Novak said, ushering Karel into his office.

Behind Novak, Karel saw a round-faced, bespectacled man who stood in a half-expectant, half-attentive pose, slightly stooped, a heavy gold watch chain dangling across his paunch.

"You wouldn't have phoned me if it weren't urgent," said Karel, "you would have written. I came as soon as I could. It wasn't easy for me to get away again. I've got a backlog of patients —"

He stopped. He began to realize that Novak and the other man were appraising him. It irritated him.

"I suppose you know why I've asked you here?" said Novak.

"I've read the afternoon papers."

Novak introduced the other man. "This is Inspector Konecky of the

Security Police. They've asked my advice because of my knowledge of the Rodnik situation. I suggested the present procedure; I felt it might save all of us time and embarrassment. Shall we sit down?"

He offered cigarettes and reached for the pack of matches on his desk. It took him longer than usual to strike one.

Karel watched the cigarette smoke curl along the desk and rise toward the window. His irritation grew. He had expected Novak to question him — but in a friendly, informal manner. Why the police?

"Then you've read about the plane?" said Novak.

"Yes," Karel replied hesitantly. "It was quite a surprise to me."

"We've known about it since yesterday — first the disappearance of the plane; and then we received word from Munich."

"You'll get the plane back, though?"

"Oh, yes. But that's not the point."

"No, it isn't," said Karel. But what was the point? The fact that the theft of the plane was annoying and humiliating and gave the foreign press something to write about?

The inspector was now balancing a note pad on his stubby knee. "Do you mind?" he asked Novak.

Novak shrugged. "Go ahead!"

"Were you very close to your brother, Dr. Benda?"

Karel gazed at the policeman's pencil. Thomas was right — there were no simple answers; at any rate, none so simple that they would make sense in an official report.

"My brother considered me his enemy, Inspector." He frowned. "The worst enemy he had."

"But you didn't consider him your enemy?"

Karel held himself back. "I understood him very well. . . ."

"Perhaps I can explain —" said Novak.

"I get the picture," Konecky interrupted. "You see, Dr. Benda, I spent last night reading reports, and this morning I talked to people who knew him — other deputies, business associates, former fellow officers —"

"What do you think of him?"

Konecky twisted his watch chain around his finger. "It is not my business to surmise. I merely gather facts and arrange them in a certain order. But I would say that his is a very ordinary case, thousands of men of his background are like him, except that the means he employed were not ordinary. . . ."

"Kidnaping the plane certainly was extraordinary — but do you class him as a criminal?"

"Don't you?" Novak asked cuttingly.

"If man is the product of his environment — " Karel began.

"So were the guards at Buchenwald products of their environment!" Novak crushed out his cigarette. "Where does that lead us?"

"That's an unfair comparison," Karel said uneasily.

Konecky moved in his chair. "If you don't mind. . . ."

"Excuse me, Inspector!" Novak rose and stepped to the window.

The policeman leaned forward over his paunch. "Dr. Benda, did you have any advance information that your brother was planning to leave?"

It wasn't only the inspector who was waiting for the answer. Somehow, this answer seemed very important to Novak as well. Karel wished he could oblige Novak. He wished the whole post-mortem were over and done with. What was it good for except to transform him from a witness into a defendant?

"Did you?" pressed Konecky.

"Yes."

"Oh — " the lines on Novak's face grew rigid, "I see."

Konecky asked, "How did you know, and when?"

"The day before my brother's flight, Petra, my young niece, came to me and implied as much. She refused to go with him, and I arranged for her to remain in Rodnik. She's in Prague with me now."

"The kid had more sense than you!" Novak threw at him.

"And why didn't you notify the police, or the head of your Action Committee — you are a member of the Action Committee, aren't you?" There was nothing lenient about Inspector Konecky, despite his spectacles and his comfortable padding.

"I also learned from Petra," Karel went on doggedly, "that it was Joseph's plan to take with him my other brother, Thomas Benda, the writer. I succeeded in persuading Thomas to remain."

Novak came toward him, his eyes dark. "You held Petra, and you held Thomas; but you let Joseph escape."

"Yes."

"Why?"

Karel lifted his hands and let them fall back on his knees. "I could answer you by asking. What does it matter: Joseph has cut himself off from the country, and the cut is final, and it closes the case. We're well rid of him, and of Dolezhal."

The inspector fingered his chain.

Karel looked at Novak's silhouette. "What am I — accessory to the fact?" he demanded.

"What else are you?" Novak asked with a bitterness so sharp that it seemed to charge the air in the room. "You're guilty by your own admission. But you refuse to see the full extent of what you've done. There's a

war on! I don't care if he is your brother, or whatever other rationalization your Benda mind produces —"

"Well, he *is* my brother, and it *did* make a difference!" Karel said flatly.

Novak hit back: "We're sweating blood, our people sweat blood, to make this a decent country — and you let loose on us a man who may come back tomorrow flying another plane, bombing to bits what we built and killing the people who built it! Didn't you think of that?"

Karel stared at him, chalk-white. "No, I didn't. I didn't think that far. And if I had, I wouldn't have believed it."

"If you don't mind," Inspector Konecky said.

Novak turned away. "He's all yours."

"Did you know, Dr. Benda, that your brother was going to kidnap a plane of the Czechoslovak Airlines?"

"No, of course not."

"Did you know that he and the former Minister Dolezhal were planning to make their escape together?"

"No, I didn't. I learned that only from the papers this afternoon."

"Did you ever hear your brother mention a General Duchinsky?"

"No."

"Did you know that your brother tried to help organize a military uprising against the Government?"

My brother, thought Karel. *My Brother, the Enemy* . . .

"Did you?" Konecky repeated.

"Oh my God, no!"

"Let me ask him a question, Inspector," said Novak.

"Surely."

"Now that you know, Karel — where do you stand?"

As if he were in pain, Karel rubbed his temple. "What do you want from me?" he said, tortured. "Should I tell you that under those circumstances I hope to Christ I would have had the guts to go to Kravat or to the police? What is that worth, now?"

"Not a damned thing, as far as the past is concerned. But for the future, it has some value. . . ." Novak nodded to Konecky. "Is there anything else, Inspector?"

Konecky pocketed his pad and stood up. "Not at the moment, sir. There will be proceedings *in absentia*, I believe, against the former Minister Dolezhal and the former Deputy Benda. You will hold yourself in readiness to testify, Doctor?"

"Of course."

Novak waited until the inspector was gone. "Another cigarette?" he offered, and this time he permitted Karel to give him a light.

The minutes dragged as they smoked in silence. Novak was kind to let him stay on and recover a little, thought Karel. Or were there other things to be said which were not for the ears of the inspector? As for himself, he didn't want to plead that hindsight isn't as good as foresight, or that a man's upbringing conditions his mental reflexes, or that one learns through experience. These were saws. And he didn't believe that Novak wanted to hear them.

"What do you think you're going to do now?" Novak said quietly.

"I don't know. Work, I guess. What else can I do?"

"You worked in Buchenwald, too — and what did it teach you?" Novak dropped the matter abruptly. "I saw Stanek. He's had a talk with Villner of People's Books. They have reconsidered, and they'll print a small edition of your brother Thomas's essay, if he'll let them have it."

"Buchenwald!" Karel said. "Maybe it takes some people longer to learn than others!" Then the new information sank in and set his mind moving in another direction. Thomas, who had been ready to desert, was being rewarded, and he, who had only tried to do the humane thing, became the accessory to a conspiracy. "You mean, Stanek finally threw his weight around?" he said sarcastically. "Then why did they have to put Thomas through that mill? Villner's refusal and the way he put it drove Thomas to the point of running out —"

Novak stopped him. "Stanek did not throw any weight around. You'll learn a little faster if you forget the Benda standards. In the discussion about the book, Villner saw that he was wrong."

"Maybe he had Benda standards, too?" said Karel.

Novak smiled, "Yes — in reverse!" Then, serious again, he said: "That's our problem! We have a vision and a plan, but we've got to build with the tools we inherited until we make our own, and with the people we inherited — people like Vaclav Villner and Karel Benda. . . ."

He sighed and stuffed back the empty sleeve that had worked itself out of his pocket.

". . . and Jan Novak," he added, angrily.

What a lot of paper!

Notes, drafts, sketches, unfinished manuscripts — I don't know where to begin, but when did I ever know where to begin? And where to end?

Kitty did keep some order in this stuff, it's really a shame I upset everything, tore everything out of its shelves. It's a miracle how she found her way through this mountain, how she could make head or tail of things — and always behind my back, because I'd chase her out when I found her busy, busy, busy with what was none of her business. Now I've truly

created a mess — stupid, senseless! Sitting here half the night, reading myself half blind, half crazy. . . .

I guess I thought I'd find something worth salvaging, something on which to build, something about which one might say: Well, he did more than just try. . . . My dear Mr. Thomas Benda, we regret to inform you that your material, while interesting, is very much outdated, practically antediluvian. It shows you have talent, but it also shows how you wasted it. Since, as you know, the country is suffering from shortages, we sincerely suggest that you consign this pile to one of our wastepaper collections which will be held periodically.

You think I think that's funny? I don't think so at all. I think you are absolutely and 100 per cent right. I have come to the point where I can afford to be quite open with you and with myself. I've maneuvered myself to where I'm sitting between all the available chairs, on a stool of thin air — and now you'll laugh when I tell you: I used to believe it was a desirable spot and to pride myself on being able to get into my unnatural position.

In my essay, I predicted what would happen to me; and just because it's coming true, because I'm right, my work and I become ludicrous. I'm like the dog who chased his own tail, or the fellow who stood between the double mirrors and could see himself, front and back, front and back, *ad nauseam ad infinitum*. I'm ridiculous and superfluous and should have at least enough character to get under my own epitaph so it doesn't stand astride an empty hole.

Now my good and simple brother Karel, who saved the only thing worth saving out of my life — my wife Kitty — says I should not despair, that millions of people want me to enrich their life, and other well-meant consolations. I suppose that according to his lights he is correct. But I was brought up to protest, disparage, and destroy, to find beauty in strange poisonous flowers growing uselessly in useless swamps, to dream sick dreams and take those dreams apart, take everything apart, including myself.

There was a horrible lightning and thunder, and out of it stepped Father and wiggled his finger and ordered: Put it all together again! Be positive, be constructive! I will reward you if you're good; if not, I will punish you!

I could be good and trip about and gather little pebbles to be mixed into the plaster they slap at the walls of the house which Father will build.

But I hate Father — always hated him since he put my mother in her grave. She suffered so long and so patiently, and her hands grew more and more transparent, until she didn't have the strength to lift them and put them on my head. If I've said No, I meant it for Father; if I've been de-

structive, I've meant to destroy Father; and I've always trembled in fear of him. Now Father has become all-powerful, and there is no escape from him.

I've tried — oh, I've tried to measure up. I climbed on Joseph's shoulders, or on Karel's; I used my women for support — but no one can carry you for nothing, not even Kitty. They all demand their price: Allegiance.

I've tried it. And I've tried to stand on my own. I wrote this Essay, and it was to be my declaration of independence from all of them, and from Father. But where on this earth is there a spot where a man can plant his feet and stand alone?

And I'm not the kind of man to stand alone. I wanted to give; but no one would accept from me on my terms. On Joseph's terms — yes; on Karel's, Kitty's, Vlasta's, Elinor's, Barsiny's, Villner's — yes; never on my own. Above all on Father's terms, who is all of them — the people, the Government, the State, and God. I cannot unmake myself and say Amen to their Yes, and Amen to their No! And so they've elbowed me out of their lives; even Kitty has.

And I loved them so much — some of them. I don't hate people, I love them! I love the land and the peasant plowing it, love to walk alongside of him, talk to him. Our glassworkers with their wonderful hands, and the stories they told! And I stood with the people on Old Town Square!

It's hard not to belong; it's hard to have nothing entitling you to belong; it's hard to have locked yourself out of your Father's house.

Karel would say they will take me back; but I would come with empty hands, and be a stranger among them and a drain on them and a spreader of doubts.

I can't stand this room any longer, the papers, the dirt, the quiet. It's my table, my chair, my mirror, my couch, everything in its accustomed place, and yet, it does not feel like my study. I'll give myself an excuse to get out. I'll say I'm hungry. I am, actually, a little. This is, of course, the height of folly — my stomach working on, making demands, as if nothing were happening, as if we were not at the threshold of something so new and so still that even this stomach will stop rumbling.

Here's the switch to the lamp in the living room. Too much light. Where there's too much light, there's too much shadow. People would be better off if they learned to accept more of the dusk where things aren't so sharp and where questions can go unanswered.

How can I ever find anything in this kitchen! There — the bread is moldy. Kitty didn't come all of yesterday; she didn't send up anyone, either. How does she expect me to live? Look at the dishes in the sink! The cupboards are open; that's yesterday's coffee grounds in the cups. When you see a kitchen like that, you lose your appetite.

I forgot to turn off the light in the kitchen. Let the cockroaches see what they're doing.

Ah, there are the fine bindings on the shelves! I always liked these shelves in the living room. I didn't buy too many books in my lifetime. Books tie you down, just like anything else you possess. Look at Joseph — what could he take along?

Mother's books — she left them to me. Here are the novels of Jirasek, here is Neruda, Cech, Vrchlicky. A very nice edition of Byron; Shakespeare, of course; Heine; she did read a lot of Maupassant and the early Thomas Mann. Each book with her *Ex Libris*: An hourglass, half run down — rather a morbid idea. Marginal notes; she had a fine handwriting, a little fragile, like herself. . . . No, I won't start reading now! I've read more than enough for one night, one author the poor woman never had to read.

And this is my book! Bound in green Morocco, my name embossed in gold — distinguished. Kitty had that done, and she carted the thing around on all our travels. *To my love, my Thomas*, on the flyleaf. She did love me, I swear to God, and I destroyed it. There's a collection she made of what I wrote in America. It's not complete; I was quite careless with my clippings. Elinor's book — she *would* have a selection of her columns printed — probably paid the publisher, too, or gave up her royalties. *To my dear fellow fighter!* What did we fight for — freedom? Now freedom has come, the kind of freedom that has no use for me. Three copies of the Essay, typed by Kitty, in cardboard binders she made herself. The woman's hands are everywhere; it is as if she'd gone but left her hands behind. Why didn't she take all this along? And here — this I made myself, for Vlasta. Copied them myself, with pen and ink: *Poems by Thomas Benda*. But I never gave them to her, never could bring myself to it. After all, it is a very romantic idea to woo a girl with poetry.

Books, papers, shadows of people. But more or less, this is the life I always lived! Only I was flesh and blood, the others came and passed. Perhaps I should write a letter to Karel. *Dear Karel, I've decided to put a period behind my sentences.* Better yet: *Since you're the only Benda to survive . . .* No, this way: *I could give you many reasons, each of them insufficient in itself; but in the aggregate . . .*

Why bother? He'll find out soon enough. They're bound to call him, he's the only doctor in town. I should write him, perhaps, that he must tell Kitty she is not to grieve and not to reproach herself. On the other hand, why shouldn't she grieve and reproach herself? Haven't I grieved all my life and reproached myself?

The rug on these stairs is a menace. It should be nailed down safely, a person can slip and turn an ankle — let others worry. I wonder who's go-

ing to rent the house. Karel wouldn't — no, not with Kitty. It would be too ghoulish.

I would like to lie down for a while. But my bed isn't made, neither is Kitty's. Karel should have had the consideration to smooth out the covers and the spread after he slept on it. Besides, if I lie down now, I'm likely to fall asleep and wake up tomorrow and have another day and another night and go through all this again. I'm tired. I'll have time to rest, plenty of time, eternity. How long is eternity? It should be easy to tell — that's where I came from!

Oh dark, sweet, velvety, restful dark! This is the final freedom! If someone should ask me now what I would weep over I would say: My mother's death; it left me like a crab without its shell. And if the question were whom I would weep over, I would say, Kitty — for I think I loved her.

This is her room, untouched as she left it, with the picture of me on her chest of drawers, her work table, the portable typewriter on which she copied what I wrote, her sewing kit, the sundries of her life. I feel awfully married. She tried to protect me, in her way. Everybody tried to protect me. They should have let me live — I'd be alive now. They shouldn't have tried to take care of me merely because I was weak and sickly and a great talent. In a few minutes, and henceforward, they'll *have* to take care of me.

The door leading out of her room still squeaks. It wasn't so long ago she promised she'd oil it. Too much happened. I went away, to Vlasta. If Vlasta were alive, I'd be alive.

The bathtub has a dirt rim. There are hairs on the basin. Only one cake of soap left, and not much of that. Let me wash my hands. In a way, I'm going to do something medical, and the hands ought to be clean after going through those old papers.

I should have hired a charwoman, or Kitty should have hired one for me. It's always best to have a charwoman find you; she doesn't belong to the family. Too late for that, now! It'll be quite a sensation. They may forget you in life; but in death, you make a splash. I'll be good for at least a full column of Elinor's. She will prove conclusively that I was murdered, directly or indirectly, by the new setup. Since I don't fit in, she wouldn't be so far wrong. The papers here will allude to Joseph's escape, and say that by remaining I proved my loyalty to my country, and hint that I was unable to cope with the pressures brought to bear on me by reactionaries like Elinor Simpson and my brother Joseph. And they won't be so far wrong, either. Apparently, there were many facets to me, too many.

Kitty will blame herself. For quite a while, she'll go on wishing she'd stayed with me a little longer, and curse herself for giving in to the only decision I ever made. Sorry, can't be helped. And she'll bounce back; she

has that sane and healthy, bouncy quality that's most annoying but in such cases as these quite useful. Karel will be hard hit; he meant so well. Joseph meant well, too. There is an oversupply of people who mean well; they take the webbing of your life and introduce new threads and then act amazed if the pattern looks cockeyed. Joseph will hear about it when the news has seeped across the border, a week or so from now. I can see him, staring at his big, bungling hands, but Lida will tell him it's all my fault — why didn't I fly off with them? That's as good an excuse for him as any; he'll begin to believe it because he always must believe that others are at fault, and finally he'll be convinced and even despise me a little for having taken the short way out while he goes living on, in Munich, or London, or Washington, with a perspective that ends nowhere. Petra will have tears for me. I wonder what she would have grown up to be with Vlasta and myself to guide her. A problem child, probably, like myself. Now she'll mourn, and then forget and admire Karel and ape him and become a citizen of this new world; they're getting her early, before she is spoiled. She'll turn out firm and monolithic, isn't that what they call it? A monolithic tiny cell in a big organism, warm and comfortable and secure, but oh so humdrum.

For Petra's sake, perhaps . . .

No, I could never do it alone. Damn Vlasta.

Vlasta was so beautiful. Too beautiful to let herself be touched. And Vlasta won't weep. No heart.

The bottle is there on the window sill, still in the druggist's wrapping. None of Karel's famous autopsies necessary; he'll just have to take one look at the empty bottle of what he prescribed for me. The string unties easily enough; let the paper fall where it may; now the cork comes out. How small these pills are and how many there are of them —

I'd better get a glass of water to wash them down.

The train engine whistled disconsolately from the distance. The small group of somber men on the railroad station in Rodnik stepped out of the shelter onto the open platform.

Professor Stanek, his thin white hair moving softly in the wind, wiped his red-rimmed eyes and put his pince-nez back on his nose. "A teacher, damn it," he said, "is supposed to die before his student."

Ministerial Councilor Novak put his one arm about Karel's shoulder and said, "These speeches you make over a grave. . . . But I'd like you to know, Karel, I meant every word. I meant it when I said the country is going to miss Thomas Benda. Miss him — not as he was, but as he could have developed if death had not been in him from the beginning. We will take over from his work what is alive. There was something in him that

was of the spirit of our people — the searching, I mean, the self-searching. It destroys some, others it helps.”

The engine was rapidly growing larger, the cars behind it appeared at a bend of the tracks.

“It was good of you to come,” said Karel, straightening his black tie. “It’s a funny feeling — not to have to worry about him any longer. So you worry about something else; you worry whether you’ve done everything for him you should have done, and what you’ve done wrong; until you realize that this was his tragedy — people doing things for him. I’m very sad. Thanks for coming, and for the wreaths, and everything.”

“If you don’t mind an old man telling you . . .” said Stanek . . . “but I used to tell things to Thomas, too, and he didn’t mind . . . Don’t look back, Karel, you’ve got a job ahead of you!”

“Yes, I know,” Karel said, a little tiredly, and glanced at Kravat who, tall and angular, stood behind the other two. “A big job — so much work.”

The train chugged up to the platform and, with a hiss and a screech and a clatter, came to a stop.

“Would you like to get out of here?” said Novak. “I could inquire about some position in Prague for you.”

“I’ll think about it,” said Karel.

Kravat had opened the door to a compartment.

“Let me know, will you?” called Novak.

Then the two stood at the window of their compartment, the door banged shut, the dispatcher in his red cap raised his stick, the train jerked on and became smaller and smaller; finally, even the vibrations of the rails ceased.

“I’ll walk you a bit,” said Kravat, leading Karel off the platform. “Or would you rather be left alone?”

“No! No, no. . . . Come along.”

But Karel soon forgot that he wasn’t alone. Automatically trudging alongside Kravat, his eyes fixed on nothing, he gave himself to his sense of loss; it yawned, like an empty cave, inside his chest. It was possible, he thought, that when he called Thomas’s house to tell him about the acceptance of the Essay, Thomas was still alive. But would it have really changed anything? Would it have changed anything if he hadn’t taken Kitty and Petra to Prague that day? Or if he had forced Kitty to go back and live on St. Nepomuk and be Thomas’s nurse and jailer? Or was Thomas’s death the logical postscript to the Essay, the final argument for the impossibility of living in the twilight zone between black and white, above the clash of the sides and the beating of the drums, neither with Joseph nor with him?

The Essay. . . . It would be out three or four months from now. They'd do a nice printing job, probably, with a dignified cover — dark blue, maybe, with white lettering: *Essay on Freedom*, BY THOMAS BENDA. He'd step into a bookstore and buy two copies of the first edition, one for himself and Kitty; the other he'd have wrapped for mailing. *What's the address, please?* the clerk would ask. The address, yes . . . He didn't have Joseph's address, and he would never have it.

"You aren't going to accept that offer?" said Kravat.

Karel started. "What? What offer?"

"That offer to go to Prague and live there and work there."

"No, I don't think so," Karel said hazily.

"You can go, of course, if you want to," Kravat was a little embarrassed. "But, you see — we like you here, and you've been doing great work, and — you're the only Benda left. . . . When I think what your brothers might have done for us, for the people, for Rodnik, for the country . . . What's the point of talking about that?"

"No point at all," said Karel.

"As for Kitty Benda," Kravat went on, "I don't know what your plans are, and that's none of my business. . . ."

Karel said nothing.

"There's a course I heard about. If she'd like to take it, after graduation she could join the District Health Office and be stationed in Rodnik and help you. It's only a six months' course — if her mind isn't set on other work. . . ."

Karel smiled at Kravat, smiled for the first time since he had returned from Prague and been called in by the police to look at his dead brother.

"I'll tell Kitty about it," he said.

They came to the Market Square. A few glassworkers, who had not yet gone home from the funeral, lifted their caps and said, "Good afternoon, Doctor!" Or, "Sorry, Doctor!" And, "We're grieving with you, Doctor!"

Ruziczka, the police sergeant, strolled over, saluted, and said, "I would rather be talking about the stars, Doctor, as we did the other night. . . ."

"Thank you."

Ruziczka cleared his throat and saluted and walked off.

They crossed the square and entered the street in which Karel had his flat and his office.

"Going to stay with us?" asked Kravat.

"Yes."

"Well — this is your house!"

"See you tomorrow," said Karel, "at the Works. Hours as usual. And thanks for everything."

"What do you want to thank me for?" Kravat shrugged. "I've seen a lot

of funerals in my time, of workers and of others. And afterwards, I always felt all the stronger how life goes on, and that we're not living alone. Not alone," he repeated, and added thoughtfully: "Not like Thomas, poor fellow."

The cracked bell jarred. He pushed open the door for Karel, and was gone.

Someone in slippers came noiselessly down the stairs.

"Karel?"

It was Petra. She placed her finger on her lips.

"I've put Kitty to bed, and I think she's asleep. She was all exhausted. She prepared some dinner for you. She asked me to serve it to you — it's not much, but if you care to eat?"

"We've got to eat," he said. "I have a heavy schedule tomorrow."